



NINA CLARE

MAGIC AND
MATCHMAKING

The Jane Austen Fairy Tales 1
A variation of Emma

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THE JANE AUSTEN FAIRY TALES

*Magic and
Matchmaking*

A VARIATION OF EMMA
VOLUME I

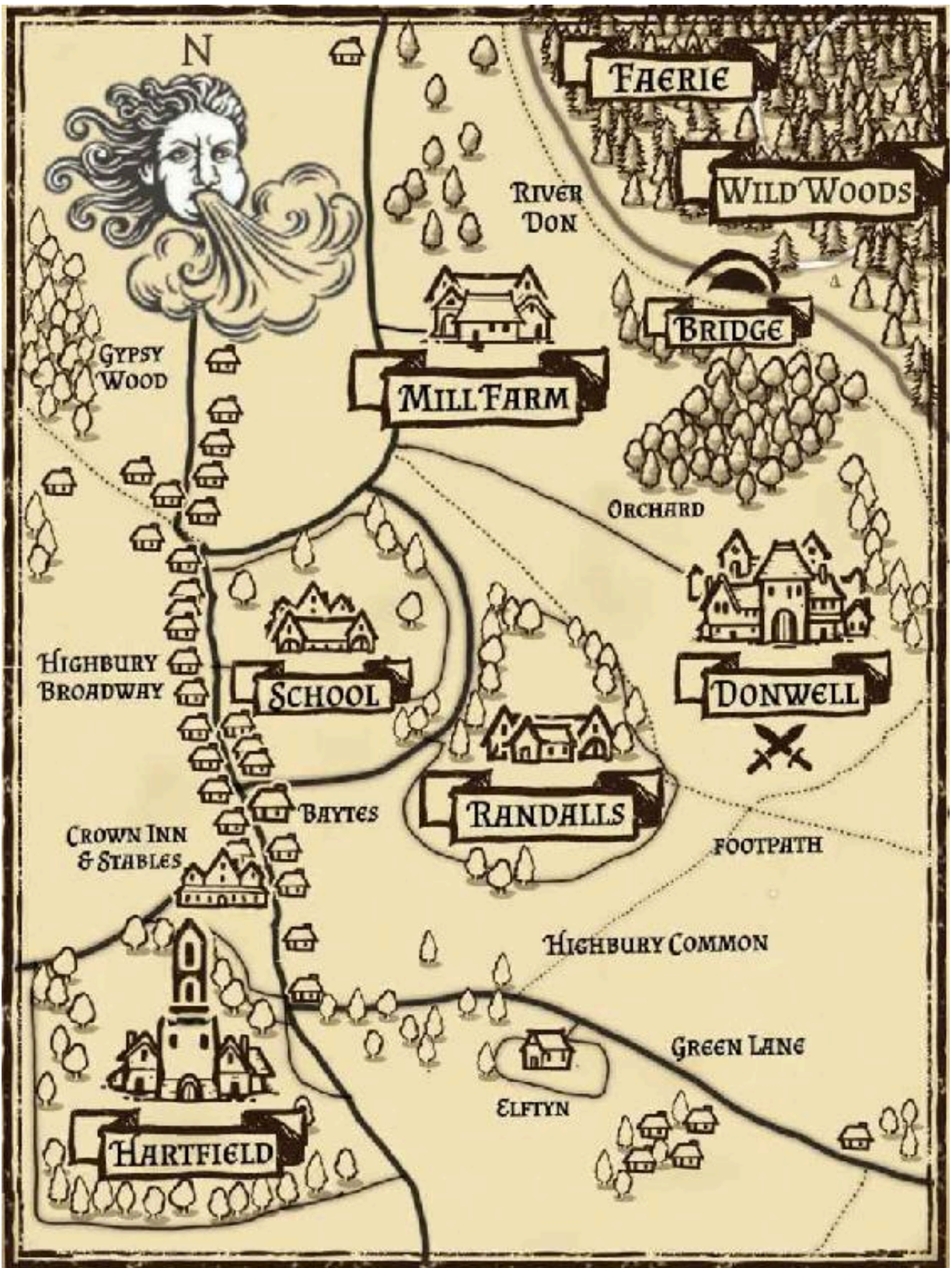
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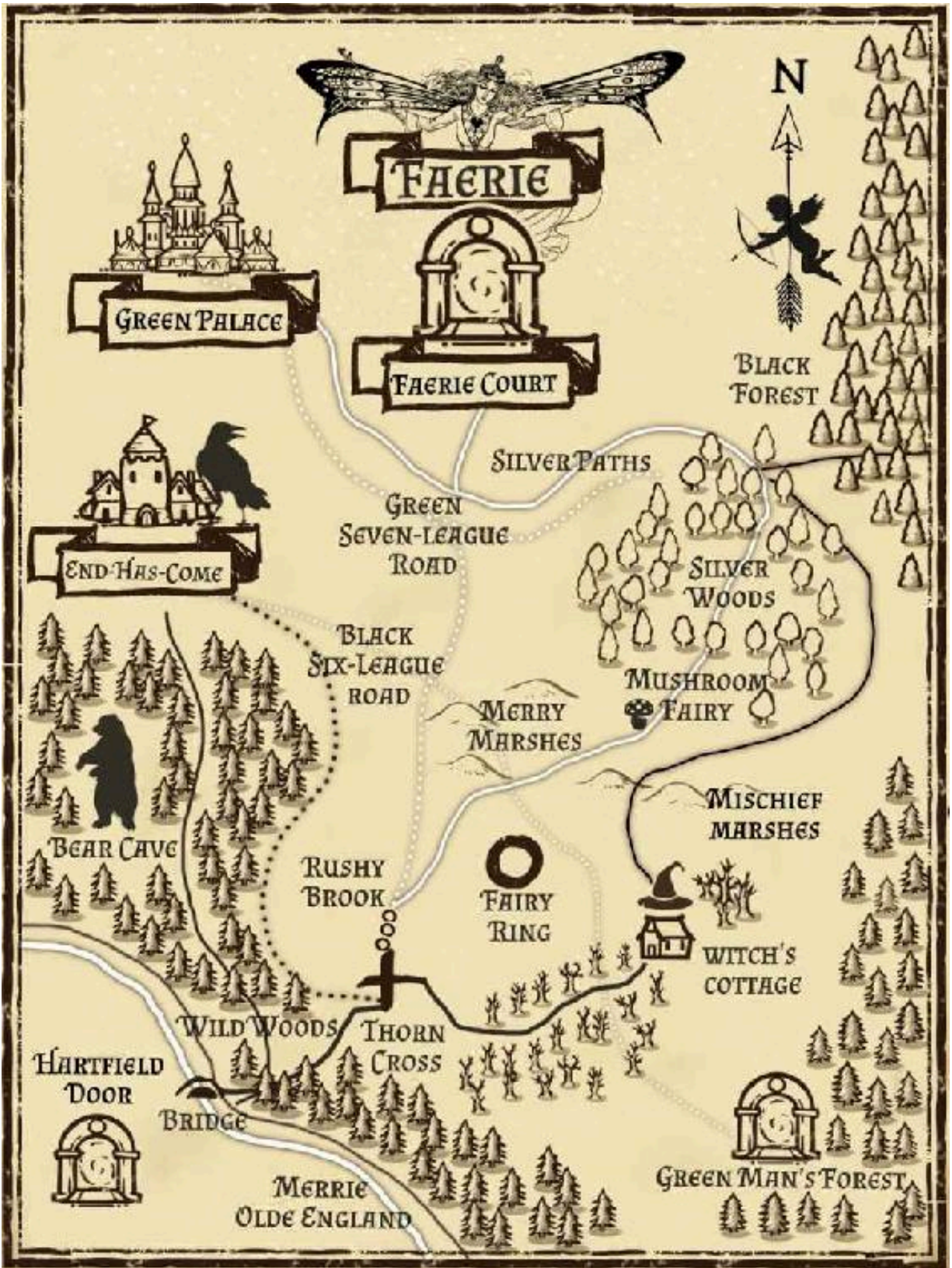
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A PROPOSAL OF MARRIAGE

PROLOGUE

The day of the fall of the Last Apple, October

Frank Charmall, handsome and rich, had lived twenty-four years between two worlds, with much to vex and distress him.

He walked impatiently up and down the path, looking in the direction that she would come from. Would she come? Or would that delicate sense of honour keep her away?

The sun had barely risen, and the autumnal morning was cool and misty, turning the horizon into a blur. It was hard to tell where the sea ended and the sky began. But something else came up from west, heading directly towards him out of the mist. Something large and black with storm-cloud wings. Frank groaned. *So soon!* He knew it could not be long, but did it have to be *today*?

The messenger bird alighted on the wall bordering the footpath. It gave a single, unnecessary shriek of greeting and shook out its wings for added effect. Frank's heart was heavy as he reached for the message on the bird's leg. He snatched it quickly; the bird's beak was sharp, and it pecked for amusement.

Two words were scrawled in black, spidery strokes:

Home. Now.

Frank scrunched up the note, hating even the foul smell that lingered in its ink. 'Tell her I'm on my way.'

The bird glared back at him.

‘Well, go on then,’ Frank snapped. ‘I’ll leave within the hour. I’ll even take the six-league path, if I must. I can do no more.’

If a bird could sneer, then this one did. It launched off and flapped away, first circling Frank’s head so closely as to force him to duck. Frank watched it disappear to the island’s causeway, where the south-western gateway to Faerie lay.

He squeezed the wretched note tighter.

‘Frank,’ came a voice from the pathway. ‘Are you there?’ A light blue cloak, a slim, young figure, dark hair, beautiful grey eyes.

‘You came,’ he cried in relief, and ran to meet her, reaching for her through the drifts of mist.

‘Your note said it was of the utmost importance.’ She glanced about anxiously. ‘I can only spare a minute before I’m missed. What is it?’

He took both her hands, and she glanced around again. ‘Frank,’ she protested, but she left her hands in his.

‘It *is* of the utmost importance,’ he cried, speaking quickly, a sense of urgency upon him. ‘I’m called home, I must leave this instant, but I won’t go without your promise.’

‘What promise? Why must you go so soon?’

‘Promise me your hand. Your heart. Say that they are mine!’

‘Frank, you don’t know what you ask!’

‘I do! I offer you mine – say you return them. Say you will be my own.’

‘Is this a proposal?’

‘Yes! Marry me.’

‘When? How? Frank, you know my circumstances, I am not a good match for you.’

‘Says who?’ blazed Frank, drawing her closer. ‘I say you are my *perfect* match! Can there be any doubt we’ve been brought together this past fortnight? The happiest days of my life! Surely some fairy Godmother has brought us together, I have felt it, have not you?’

‘I... I don’t know. I am not so familiar with the ways of magic as you, Frank.’

‘Consider the timing! At every turn we have been thrown together, all has worked to conspire to unite us, some good and wondrous spirit has determined that we are perfect for one another, tell me you have not felt that?’

‘You know I have, Frank. You know how I feel. But I cannot submit to a match your aunt would disapprove of, and you cannot support a wife if you are cut off. We must be practical.’

‘No! We must seize happiness while we can and not be subject to the wicked influence of any who would drive us apart!’

‘You are too romantic, Frank, there are practical considerations. And can you really call your aunt a wicked influence? Wicked is so strong a word.’

‘I can,’ said Frank firmly. ‘Leave all practical considerations to me. Only trust me. Will you do that?’

She sighed, but she met his gaze. Her grey eyes soft as the sea mist. ‘I will. I do trust you.’

‘Dearest Jane! We will keep our engagement a secret until I find a way for us to marry. But you must give me hope, my darling. I have not the courage to defy such opposition as I will face unless I know that I have your heart.’

‘You have it, Frank. But when will I see you again? I am asked to go to Eire after Midwinter, and I may be gone many months.’

‘Don’t leave the kingdom. Go to Highbury instead. I’ll follow you there. Is it not part of the wonder that we should both have connections in the same village? Send word as soon as you are there, and I will follow, I promise.’

‘Very well. I shall not go to Eire. I will go home to Highbury, but don’t leave me there waiting for long, Frank. My aunt and grandmother love me dearly, but they have not the room nor means to keep me. I cannot burden them. I should be grieved over every bite of food I ate knowing how small their means are.’

‘I will not leave you one minute longer than I have to – if I had my own will I should never leave your side, not now, not ever!’

‘I must go. They will wonder at my not being at breakfast. Farewell, my love.’

‘Until Midwinter, or thereabouts, my darling.’

A SPIRITED BEGINNING

One month earlier

The village of Highbury lies softly tucked away in Merrie Old England amidst green fields and country paths and hedgerows of wildflowers. The main road to the city rests quiet most days, its dust not often raised by travellers.

But if one has the right vision, then one can see that the fields are not so quiet as at first glance, for the meadow sprites are busy, especially on full moons, when they like to dance.

Shops and houses cluster about the cobbled Broadway of Highbury village. Residents bustle about their business, or linger about their pleasure. On the junction of the Broadway and the Donwell road, set back within pleasant grounds, stands the school. The sign reads: *Mother Goodword's Parlour School for Young Ladies & Fairy Godmothering Elementary Training*.

The school's neat gardens and the sound of children's laughter make for a pleasant place. Its walls are of the cheerful red bricks native to that area of the kingdom, but the foundations are of old stone from over the border in Faerie.

Atop the conical turret of the school library is a copper wind vane, shaped as a large fox. Seventeen-year-old Harriet Smith watched it closely. She could be imagining things, but, no, the brushy tail on the copper fox *had* twitched. It had twitched towards the south.

'Harriet, you're back!' Harriet's fellow Godmothering student called out. She'd come from the bee garden, judging by her pollen-yellow fingers.

‘Rue!’ Harriet greeted. ‘Did you have a pleasant summer?’

‘I did. Right glad to be back though. You didn’t walk here, did you?’ Rue glanced at Harriet’s modest trunk and her large wicker basket.

‘Master Martin drove me in the gig.’

‘How was your summer with them? I hope Lizzy weren’t too bossy?’

‘No one was bossy. Everyone was so kind.’ Harriet gave a little sigh. ‘I miss them already.’ She looked upwards. ‘I thought I saw the fox move.’

Rue looked up at the weathervane, her hands on her hips, making a pollen stain on her gown. They watched carefully for a moment.

‘There!’ said Harriet. ‘Did you see?’

‘I did. Tail to the south, head to the north.’

‘Did you see his whiskers? They only twitch when it’s a big wind.’

‘She’s coming then,’ said Rue.

‘She shouldn’t come until the fall of the Last Apple, and that’s not for weeks yet.’ Harriet tugged her light woollen shawl a little closer, though it was a mild September morning.

‘We got nothing to worry about,’ said Rue brightly. ‘We ain’t done nothing wrong, the first day of term ain’t even started yet.’ Rue yelped, swinging round as the chestnut sprite in the tree behind tossed a nut at her head.

‘She always makes me nervous,’ said Harriet, her light-blue eyes still watching the wind vane. She listened hard to the words in the rising wind. They did not speak of anything so alarming as the North Wind being imminent, but they whispered of something about to happen, and the fox had a sly grin. ‘When she looks at you it’s like she can see right through you.’ Harriet shivered again.

‘Let’s tell Mother Goodword,’ said Rue, turning back to the school entrance. ‘It’s nearly time for the meeting.’

They crossed the courtyard, and Rue shook her fist at the sprite as a volley of husks rained down on her.



‘A NEW SCHOOL YEAR BEGINS, SISTERS,’ Mother Goodword announced, her neat, white cap ribbons nodding beneath her grey hair.

Cloe-Claws sat in the centre of the classroom table, her eyes closed, but her ears twitching as though she were listening to every word spoken. No one even thought of lifting the enormous silver-and-black striped cat out of the way, even if she made it difficult to see one another across the table. Cloe-Claws sat wherever she liked. Mother Goodword often said jokingly that it was Cloe's school, not hers.

'Tomorrow the younger students begin their new academic year—'

'And we start our last year of training!' said Rue, grinning at Myrtle and Harriet.

Myrtle's black eyebrows made a scowl. Those present knew her well enough to know that it was not a bad-tempered scowl, but meant that she was thinking about something. 'Only if we *pass* our third year,' said Myrtle, playing with the wooden knitting needle she used as a hairpin. 'And why must I learn matchmaking? I'm making a study of darklings, not romance. I won't be matchmaking gryphons and basilisks.'

'I like matchmaking,' said Harriet, 'but it is rather daunting.'

'It will be *fun*,' said Rue.

'It will be difficult,' said Mother Goodword. 'But I have confidence in you all.' Cloe-Claws flicked the end of her tail. 'Yes, *all*.'

'But,' said Harriet, 'what if we fail? What if we can't make anyone fall in love? What if there are no marriages? What if—?'

Cloe-Claws gave Harriet a look to silence her mid-sentence.

'We do not *make* anyone fall in love,' said Mother Goodword. 'What is the first rule of Godmother magic?'

'*Aid and Awaken*,' chorused the three Sisters.

'We *aid* our wards in meeting their match. We *awaken* them to their own hearts. We do not make our wards do anything against their own recorded destiny. We are there to support and protect their best path.'

'Unless it is a matter of *Life and Death*,' said Sister Myrtle, liking the weighty tone of the words.

'Unless it is a matter of saving a life,' agreed Mother Goodword. 'In such circumstances we may use magic to intercept, but even then, we are subject to the authorities.'

'Unless you're a Grand Godmother, or a Wisewoman,' added Rue. 'Then you can curse 'em and blight 'em and give 'em all kinds of lessons!'

'Curse *them*, blight *them*,' Mother Goodword corrected. 'And no, as acolyte Godmothers, you will not curse or give life lessons. That is for the

higher ranks.'

'I would sooner curse and blight than matchmake,' Myrtle murmured.

'I should hate to curse and blight,' said Harriet. Her face brightened as she thought of something happier. 'Will I get my Godmothering name now? I have been thinking about it and the Martin sisters helped me write a list of all the prettiest names – Sister Celandine, Sister Primrose, Buttercup, Delphinium, Gladioli...' Harriet ticked off the names on the fingers of one hand. 'Elizabeth said Belladonna, but I think that was a joke. I like Gladioli best, but I named their new cow that, or Chrysanthemum...' she tailed away as she ran out of fingers.

'It's tradition for your acolyte name to begin with the same letter as your birth name,' Myrtle reminded Harriet.

'Oh yes. So it is. What names begin with H?'

'Hemlock,' suggested Rue. 'I'm joking,' she said, when Harriet's face fell. 'There's lots of nice names beginning with H.'

'Such as?' said Harriet. 'I can only think of Harebell.'

'Heather, Hyacinth... help me out, Myrtle.'

'Hosta?' was Myrtle's suggestion. 'Hollyhock?'

'I had quite set my heart on Chrysanthemum,' Harriet said sadly.

'The Council has not accorded you an acolyte name as yet,' Mother Goodword said in a gentle voice, as though this were something delicate.

Harriet's blue eyes blinked slowly. 'I know I'm not as good at sensing as I ought to be, and my weather-making is bad, but I will practise more this term.' A little quaver gathered in her voice. Myrtle fidgeted, not liking emotion, but Rue stretched her hand across the table to squeeze Harriet's arm and said, 'We'll help you, Harriet, don't worry.'

'For the Council not to have given you a name yet,' said Mother Goodword, 'simply means that the course of your path is not yet clarified, my dear.'

'Clarified?' Harriet's voice still quivered.

'You have some choices to make which will confirm you in your calling as a Godmother, or alter your course. Even destinies include choices. Time will make things apparent.'

Harriet nodded, but looked more confused than assured.

'It is vital that you work together this year,' continued Mother Goodword. 'Matchmaking is a difficult art. It will involve refining and perfecting all that you have studied. Here are your assignments.' She took

up the notes before her and passed them round. Papers rustled as the Sisters unfolded their assignments.

‘These are the wards in our locality whom the Council have discerned as destined for marriage. You have one ward each. The Council desires you to find your ward’s match, and awaken them to one another, thus drawing them naturally together.’

‘Elizabeth Martin!’ Rue read, looking pleased. ‘She shouldn’t be hard to match.’ Her grin slipped. ‘Though she can be right stubborn. You can tell me, Harriet, if she likes anyone.’

‘It will have to be someone who appreciates cows,’ said Myrtle, frowning at her own paper.

‘Ain’t nothing wrong in being fond of cows,’ said Rue.

‘There *is nothing* wrong in being fond of cows,’ Mother Goodword said.

Harriet had given a little gasp on reading her paper. ‘Master Knightley! But, oh, Mother Goodword... such a grand person. How shall I be able to match *him*?’

‘Master Knightley,’ repeated Rue. ‘Who’d think he’d marry after all his years as a bachelor.’

‘Such a man could marry *any* lady he chose,’ said Harriet. ‘He is so rich, and quite handsome in his way. Everyone knows he is a very good kind of man. The very best. Though...’ her voice faded to a murmur, ‘he is certainly not so handsome as Master Elftyn.’

‘Glad he ain’t my ward,’ said Rue. ‘He’s so proper and...’ she rummaged for the right word.

‘Strict?’ offered Harriet.

‘Boring,’ said Myrtle.

‘How can you say he is boring?’ Harriet protested. ‘He comes from such a long line of heroes.’

‘His ancestors were delightfully interesting,’ said Myrtle. ‘The Silver Knight who battled invading ogres. His son, Cuthbert the Clever, who dug a great well and shot down the fire-wyrm into it. But a mere Master Knightley, what is he, but an upper-crust farmer?’

‘Sister Myrtle,’ Mother Goodword, warned. ‘Respectful words in my school, if you please.’

Myrtle modified her tone. ‘I consider Master Knightley’s lineage to be excellent and fascinating. I only wish the present generation were one hundredth part as interesting as their ancestors. The eldest Master Knightley

is a mere lawyer, of all the boring things a man could choose for a profession, while our resident one is but a farmer. Not that there's anything wrong with law and farming, but consider their family history – Knights of Yore, Heroes of the Realm, Dragon Slayers.'

'Yes, Sister Myrtle, we all know the history of the Knightleys,' Mother Goodword said. 'Master Knightley does not merely manage his estate, he also helps watch the border between our village and the very gateway through which ogres and fire-wyrms once came through. And if he has not had to take up arms, or pit his wits against marauding beasts or sorceresses, it is precisely because he is diligent in ensuring that no such creature approaches our land without warning. He is as much a hero as his ancestors.'

Harriet had grown a degree paler at the mention of the fire-wyrm, and her face was alternating between pleasure that such a man was *her* ward, and fear that such a man was *her* ward.

'Who've you got?' Rue asked, leaning across to see Myrtle's paper. 'Hannah Hazeldene. Who's she?'

'I know Hannah Hazeldene,' said Harriet. 'She's the new housemaid at the Westons. She worked at Donwell before that.'

'A housemaid,' said Myrtle. 'Is she destined to marry a prince or a pauper, I wonder.'

'It can't be a prince,' Harriet said. 'You'd have to be a royal Godmother for that. But how *do* we find out who our ward's matches are?'

'Cast a knowing spell?' Rue offered.

'How would we target the spell?' asked Harriet. 'The knowing spell is so very hard. I always have trouble interpreting it. I wish it wouldn't give answers in symbols.'

'We should just pick their partners for them,' said Myrtle. 'Bring them together, give them a love potion each. Easy.'

Cloe-Claws' eyes flashed deep yellow as she growled.

'What?' said Myrtle.

'You know exactly what is wrong with that idea,' said Mother Goodword. 'We do not *make* our wards do anything by magic. We respect their will. We only assist them with small magic.'

'We're not witches,' said Harriet, looking terrified at the thought. 'We don't want to control anyone.'

'We're *helpers*,' added Rue in her big voice.

‘So, what do we do next?’ Harriet asked, looking at her paper again. ‘Master Knightley,’ she repeated in a tone of awe. ‘Mother Goodword, if you please, you still haven’t answered the question. How do we find out our ward’s true love? Why doesn’t the Council just tell us? That would be so much easier.’

‘Ease is not the object of this assignment,’ said Mother Goodword. ‘Strengthening your powers of discernment is the principal object, among others. A sound foundation in discernment will help you in every area of Godmothering work. What are the lessons I taught you in Discernment and Direction class?’

‘To discern through the exercise of our senses,’ recited Harriet. ‘But how will that tell us who our wards’ matches are?’

‘You watch for signs,’ said Mother Goodword patiently. ‘And remember, little signs often tell you more than obvious ones, and signs often come in patterns.’

‘But we need Dust to sharpen our senses,’ Rue added decidedly, for she was very fond of using Dust. ‘We can’t do it without Dust.’

‘You may have the use of Dust for this assignment,’ Mother Goodword agreed. ‘A *modest* use of Dust.’ She looked pointedly at Rue.

‘But where shall we begin?’ Harriet asked. ‘Do we have to talk to our wards first?’ She was thinking of Master Knightley, whom she had never spoken to directly before.

‘You will need to speak to them. Wear your forgetfulness cloaks when appropriate. Some of your conversations may be personal, and it is less intrusive to cause their hidden thoughts to return to them by forgetting they have spoken with you.’

‘I hate personal talks,’ Myrtle said. ‘This matchmaking business is all rather busy-bodying to my mind. We should just let people get on with it themselves.’

‘Matchmaking is an ancient art, Sister Myrtle,’ Mother Goodword reminded her. ‘Since the dawn of time our Order has aided mortals in finding one another’s true love. Everyone needs a little otherworldly help in the important matters of life.’

‘Shall I make up a big batch of Dust?’ Rue asked. ‘It’ll be the last one before the bees hibernate. I’ve got most of the pollen ready.’ She waggled her yellow fingers.

‘You may assemble the rest of the ingredients,’ Mother Goodword said. ‘I will activate it as usual. Work together, Sisters, that includes you, Sister Myrtle. Sisterly support and encouragement are vital. You can all learn from one another and strengthen your knowledge and growth. Here are your term’s lesson plans for tomorrow.’

A second set of papers were passed round.

There was a groan from Myrtle. ‘Do I have to? My first term’s lesson?’

‘It’s an important exercise,’ said Mother Goodword. ‘It has value, or it would not be in the curriculum. You cannot teach dragon lore every term.’

‘Ha!’ said Rue in delight, looking at her first lesson plan. Then her expression fell a little. ‘If only I didn’t have Cora Chandler in my class. She made a sow’s ear of weather-making last term.’ Her face resumed its brightness. ‘Oh well. It will still be fun.’

‘*Fun* is not the primary object of the lesson, Sister Rue,’ Mother Goodword said.

Harriet expressed her relief that she had only to concentrate on the foundational studies of reading and writing with her young students that term, and she was happy with the list of historical legends she was to read to her class.

‘Oh, I nearly forgot,’ Harriet said as Mother Goodword moved back her chair, ready to dismiss the meeting, ‘to tell you about the fox. Its tail twitched.’

Mother Goodword paused. ‘Which direction?’

‘South,’ said Rue.

‘And his whiskers pointed north,’ added Harriet, ‘so she is coming and —’

‘*She*, Harriet?’

‘Grand Godmother North,’ said Harriet. ‘Grand Godmother North is on her way.’

‘She’ll be here early, before the Last Apple falls, won’t she?’ added Rue.

‘*Will not* she. And just because Grand Godmother North has stirred, we cannot assume that she is coming directly here. These great Winds blow where they will. Grand Godmother North may have other places to visit, our little school is but one of her wardships.’

‘Oh, good,’ said Harriet, relieved.

Mother Goodword rose, and the Sisters stood politely until she left the room. Cloe-Claws remained sat in the middle of the table which restrained

the Sisters from blurting out what they really felt about the assignments that lay ahead of them.

‘I’ll get the Dust ready,’ Rue said. ‘I need more pollen for a bigger batch.’

‘Shall I help you?’ Harriet offered.

‘You could hunt for some four-leaf-clover,’ Rue replied. ‘The more of it I put in, the better the serendipity factor.’

‘I’ll look in the west meadow,’ said Harriet, looking happy at the thought of a pleasant task. ‘Will you come?’ she said to Myrtle.

Myrtle shook her head. ‘I’m going to the library.’

‘Let me guess,’ Rue said, ‘*The Anatomical Dictionary of Reptilian Fire-Breathers?*’

‘*Geographical History of River Hags*, actually,’ said Myrtle with a gleam in her dark blue eyes. ‘New book.’

‘See you at dinner,’ Rue boomed from across the room as she left to fetch her bee-keeping hat.

But Rue did not make it so far as her bee garden, nor did Harriet leave for the meadows, for there was the sound of a farm gig crossing the courtyard and they watched as a tall young man alighted and hurried into the porch entrance.

‘Maid Smith!’ said the man, a slight flush spreading across his cheeks as he spied Harriet.

‘Master Martin!’ Harriet exclaimed with a matching blush. ‘What brings you back?’

‘You forgot this.’ He held out a small burlap bag.

‘My pattens,’ she laughed and stepped forwards to take hold of it. The light outside altered and darkened behind Master Martin, and a heavy stillness thickened the air.

‘Storm’s on its way,’ said Master Martin, glancing over his shoulder. ‘I’d best hurry back to the farm.’

‘Yes, do hurry,’ urged Harriet. ‘Or you’ll get horribly wet.’

He hesitated, then said, ‘I noticed some roof tiles looking askew as I drove up.’ He nodded his head to indicate the part of the school where the classrooms were. ‘I’ll come back as soon as it’s dry and put them straight.’

‘You’re very kind,’ said Harriet.

‘Watch out for leaks in the meantime.’ He touched his cap and turned away.

‘Thank you for bringing back my shoes!’ Harriet called after him. ‘He’s *so* kind.’

‘He brought more than shoes,’ Rue joked, looking out at the darkening sky. ‘He brought rain.’

‘I’ll check the fox.’ Harriet ran outside.

The copper fox had moved significantly. He had swung his nose from north all the way round to the south. The stillness in the air was tangible and expectant. Something was about to happen.

‘This is a sudden turnabout,’ said Harriet to the fox. ‘I wonder what it means.’ She closed her eyes, trying to listen to the messages in the air. A cool breeze whipped across the courtyard, breaking the waiting stillness. The wind stirred her hair, blowing a loose, fair strand into her eyes. A fat drop of rain fell onto her nose and she opened her eyes to look up at the sky just as the first rumble sounded.

‘Better take shelter,’ she called to the tree sprites, unnecessarily, for they had already disappeared into their tree trunks. Harriet hurried back inside, but did not close the door. She had heard in the wind that someone was coming with the storm, and it would be very rude to shut the door on them.

A VISITOR

The oak carving of the Green Lady watched over the entrance hall of the school as carefully as Cloe-Claws did.

Mother Goodword stood near to the carving of the school's Faerie benefactress, feeling the hint of green magic from the Faerie oak and sensing the approach of powerful wind magic in the air outside.

'Here she comes,' she said.

Cloe-Claws thumped her tail.

'I know,' said Mother Goodword. 'She can be a little dramatic. These Winds do like to make a grand entrance. Still, it is usually a portend of something interesting when she visits.'

Thunder boomed like a battery of drums, and lightning tore the sky with elemental zig zags. Mother Goodword and the three Sisters moved to the door to observe the phenomenon.

The rain swooshed by in a whirl as the wind gathered up the drops. The thunder and lightning gave one grand finale, and the storm arrived at the door of the school. Out of the maelstrom stepped a figure dressed in lightning silver and storm grey.

'Grand Godmother South,' greeted Mother Goodword, opening the door further and bowing politely, despite the spray of rain that met her. 'Welcome. It has been too long.'

THE THREE GODMOTHERING Sisters and the four newly arrived boarders watched eagerly as the South Wind passed into Mother Goodword's parlour,

for the South Wind was famed for her beauty, though not as highly as the West Wind.

Grand Godmother South was happy to show herself and waved her hand like an empress to her little audience.

‘Not everyone is pleased to see me,’ said the South Wind, looking at Cloe-Claw’s disapproving tail.

‘She is not fond of rain,’ said Mother Goodword. ‘Please, take a seat, I shall make tea.’

‘No time for tea. I call on business, my love.’

‘Oh?’

Mother Goodword waited expectantly, but the South Wind was too busy examining Mother Goodword’s face and person.

‘Why will you not graduate to a Grand Godmother?’ the South Wind asked. ‘How can you bear to remain almost fully mortal and thus grow so old?’ She regarded Mother Goodword’s lines and grey hair. ‘Look at me, I shall be magnificent forever, untouched by time.’

‘You will not always remain in your position,’ Mother Goodword reminded her respectfully. ‘You too shall graduate one day to something less...’ she wanted to say *showy*, but she finished with, ‘*visible*.’

‘I know,’ sighed the South Wind. ‘But I mean to remain as I am for a good many centuries yet. Being a star or planet sounds noble, but there are fewer opportunities for showing oneself, and I do so love new gowns.’ She stroked her beautiful skirts, fabulously embroidered with drops of rain and lightning thread. ‘I have found the best dressmaker in all of Faerie. I am keeping her a secret, so West does not find her.’

Mother Goodword smiled despite her own discomfort and was suddenly very aware of her own plain gown and unfussy collar. Perhaps there was something in the South Wind’s beauty that stirred a little yearning in Mother Goodword, escaping from her as a soft sigh.

‘What business brings you to my door, Grand Godmother South?’

The South Wind did not answer the question. She was too busy examining Mother Goodword’s parlour, now that she had finished examining her person. ‘It is all so *quaint*,’ she said, picking up the embroidery frame on the workbox and looking at the design, then touching the row of delicate tea cups on their shelf. ‘Do you know, I think I will have tea, it has been so long. I have grown used to silver goblets and crystal glasses. It has been years since I held a mortal teacup.’

Mother Goodword pulled the bell cord which brought a housemaid to the door. She was a young gnomess, and she stared at the South Wind in fascination. 'Ask Busie to bring in water for my teapot,' Mother Goodword said. 'That will be all,' she prompted, when the gnomess remained peering round the door frame at the glamorous visitor.

Grand Godmother South was in a nostalgic mood. 'How long has it been since I was Sister Camellia and you were Sister Ivy?' she said. 'It seems another lifetime.'

'More than half a century,' replied Mother Goodword. 'I have raised nineteen generations of new Godmothers since I arrived.'

'You did not always wish to be a teacher, did you?' Grand Godmother South was now looking through Mother Goodword's lesson plans on her desk.

'I find satisfaction in my work. I raise my students to a high standard.'

'Most commendable and desirable. Mother Sprightly thinks it acceptable to send out her graduates as some kind of boon sellers. For a fee they will make a good match or give a birth blessing, but if gold does not change hands, they will rarely stir.'

'That is *not* the true way of Godmothering,' said Mother Goodword warmly. She put down the jar of tea she had been spooning out into her teapot.

'I see you feel strongly on the matter. As does your cat.' Cloe-Claws was emitting soft rumblings.

'I have dedicated my life to the principles of good Godmothering. It grieves me that there are those who would *sell* our work.'

'But near-mortals must make a living, dear heart. Not every Godmother wishes to dwell in a shack and dress in drab.'

Mother Goodword smoothed her skirt self-consciously. 'Not every Godmother is vain and silly and wishes to wallow in luxury while people still dwell in poverty in our kingdom. A Godmother has pledged to serve those of good hearts, regardless of rank or fortune. Selling blessings and making matches for gold excludes those who have no wealth.'

'I am sure they still distribute their aid to the poor,' said Grand Godmother South. 'Personally, I do not see any harm in enriching one's self where there is opportunity.'

'We must be satisfied with thinking differently on the subject then,' said Mother Goodword, struggling to repress her indignation, but not wishing to

argue with her guest. 'Ah, here is the water!'

'You must come and drink mead with me at my abode,' said Grand Godmother South, when Mother Goodword had poured the tea and stirred in the honey. 'Come next week when you reach the south.'

'Reach the south?' Mother Goodword broke into a fit of coughing, as she swallowed her mouthful of tea too quickly.

'Why yes, did I not say? That is what I have come about. I need you to journey south. I have an assignment for you.'

'An assignment in the south? I have never been sent south in all my life! My assignment is to be here.'

'A new season is coming, my sweet, embrace it.'

'A new season? But my work here is still in progress.'

'No assignment lasts forever, dear heart, you know that full well. A new season is coming, and you have a little preparatory assignment in the south. The south west to be more accurate.'

'Doing what? What is my assignment? For how long? I have three students in their final year, I cannot leave them, I cannot leave all my girls!'

'Mother Goodword, calm yourself and recall who speaks to you!' Grand Godmother South stood up from the couch, and a low rumble of thunder vibrated through the room. The South Wind's eyes flashed with displeasure, and Mother Goodword quickly put her teacup down and stood and made a bow.

'Forgive me, Grand Godmother South. Whatever assignment is accorded to me by the Council, I am ready to fulfill.'

The thunder abated, and the South Wind's voice resumed its summery pleasure.

'Very good. And as for your students, the Council has their eye on them. They have much to learn, but they have marked out two as showing promise. One has an unusual bloodline and interesting potential. I would not take you from them if it were not necessary for them to advance faster than is usual. We must see what they are made of.'

Mother Goodword nodded gravely. 'I have sensed their potential. But I wish I could be here to guide them.'

'You mean protect them. There comes a time when a Mother has to let her protegee's make their own way, and make their own mistakes.'

'I know.'

‘There are greater stakes than you can know. Time will reveal all. A carriage will arrive at dawn seven days from Harvest Moon. Your assignment is to pass into Faerie at the southwest border and open up negotiations with the new Mer queen. There have been disputes this past century regarding the boundary lines on the coast, and intermarriage with mortals. You will negotiate both issues to the satisfaction of the Merfolk and the Godmother High Council.’

‘Harvest Moon is tomorrow. Very well,’ said Mother Goodword. ‘May I ask, with all due respect, Grand Godmother South... why me?’

‘No one is such a stickler for High Council law as you, Mother Goodword.’ The South Wind gave a smile, like the sun gleaming after a summer storm. Outside the parlour window the grey clouds melted away to reveal clear sky and golden sunshine. ‘The Merfolk can be slippery in agreeing on boundaries, but your adherence to careful wording in drawing up the treaty will make you an excellent negotiator, the Council all agrees on this point.’

‘The Council has assessed me recently? I thought no one took any notice of us here, tucked away in little Highbury.’

‘All is seen,’ said the South Wind, wagging a glowing finger, ‘you know that. Your work has not gone unnoticed. Be glad!’ she exhorted, flinging a beaming smile around the room so that the glass in the windows became dazzling with reflected light. ‘New seasons are a splendid thing. Life is change, dear heart! Change is growth, my sweet! We advance, my love! And now I must be going, but I almost forgot, you will need this.’

Mother Goodword looked in surprise at the wand held out to her. ‘But I have a wand,’ she said. ‘And that one is—’

‘Superior. It has greater authority, as befits a Council Ambassador and Treaty Negotiator. Take it. It shall not activate until your assignment begins.’

‘And what shall I do with my old one?’

But the South Wind did not answer. She was too busy gathering up her skirts that she might fit through the doorway.

‘I have an appointment at court with the mortal king and queen. There is a little princeling on the way and we must discuss appointing a suitable

Royal Guardian, and thus I *must* change my gown to something more courtly. Farewell, until we meet in the south!’



HARRIET PUT her patten shoes away in the bottom of her clothes chest. She was very glad to be home. Glad to be back in her own little room at the school, so she told herself repeatedly as she sat on the edge of her bed, looking out of her window with its bubbly glass.

The South Wind had gone, and the summer storm with her. Harriet’s view was that of the Donwell road, and beyond it the new-planted hedgerow and then the meadow that was so pretty in springtime with flowers, and had enormous trees to sit under in the summer. But there were few flowers now, and the leaves on the trees were falling.

She moved to the window and craned her neck to look eastwards. She knew that Mill Farm was in that direction. She could not see it from her window, nor could she see the orchards that lay on one side of the farm, nor the meadows on the other side, or the river that ran behind it, with the old mill clunking busily away by the water. But if she thought hard, she could almost see Mistress Martin in her kitchen, directing the bread making, or in the dairy, examining the cheeses and saying that they were coming along nicely. She could see Elizabeth Martin, in her frilled apron as she milked the cows, for even though they had a boy to look after the cows, she still liked to milk them herself, she said they were like old friends to her. And young May Martin, laughing as she swung back and forth on the swing her brother had made for her. What a kind brother he was...

‘It’s so nice to be home again,’ she said rather loudly to the room. ‘With my own bed, and my own eiderdown, and my own view, and all my friends and students.’ And then she sighed, though she did not know why. A tap at the door sounded, and the housemaid poked her head round the door to say that Mother Goodword wished to see her in her parlour.

THE PARLOUR DOOR WAS OPEN. Mother Goodword sat at her writing desk near the window. The afternoon was drawing towards evening now, and Busie, the house brownie, was at the hearth, laying a fire. Harriet politely

turned her eyes away from Busie, who always made her think of a little brown dog with her furred skin and her black eyes and small pointed ears.

Busie gathered up her wood basket and scurried silently away. The door clicked behind her. 'Sit down, Harriet, there's tea in the pot. I have only a line or two left to write.'

Harriet obediently sat down and took pleasure in looking about the room, so familiar to her since she first arrived at the school at nearly seven. She remembered how frightened she had been when she first came, and how kind Mother Goodword had been to her. She had brought her into this very parlour, and sent Busie for milk and sweet biscuits, and had held her hand as she showed her round the school and introduced her to the other small girls in the class. Her teacher was Sister Lily-of-the-Valley, but they were allowed to call her Sister Lillian. Harriet had cried every night for three weeks when Sister Lillian graduated and went away to become a Weather Watcher on the coast.

Mother Goodword's things were all neatly ordered on their shelves. Busie kept everything so tidy and sparkling clean. Mother Goodword's beautiful fancy work hung about the room, and her trinkets, made up of gifts from her students, were prettily arranged on the mantelpiece.

'I am writing a note to Mistress Woodhouse,' Mother Goodword said, pausing from her scribing. 'I should like you to come with me to the manor tomorrow evening.'

'Me? Go to Hartfield Manor? But why would they want me?' She thought of Mistress Woodhouse, the lady of the manor, so beautiful, so elegant, like a queen in a story.

'Mistress Woodhouse is considering becoming a Sister. You may tell her all about the school and the elementary Godmothering subjects we cover.'

'Me? Tell Mistress Woodhouse all about everything!' Harriet gave a nervous giggle. 'But she's so elegant and she looks very clever. How could I talk to *her*? What should I say?'

'You will be your own good-natured self, Harriet. Openness and honesty, two of the best qualities a person can have.'

'Yes. To be sure,' said Harriet earnestly. 'Oh, Mother Goodword, me go up to the manor!' The gloom that had overshadowed her return home that day was dispelled by such a happy expectation.

Mother Goodword sealed her note and stood it upright, ready for delivery in the morning. She moved to her fireside chair and opened her

workbasket, bending over it, looking for the skein of silk she wanted, then sat back to thread her needle. 'Now tell me, Harriet. How did your visit to the Martins fare?'

'Oh, very well indeed. They were all so good to me. I was a little frightened of Mistress Martin at first, for she is very particular about everything, but she is kind and very hardworking, just like Elizabeth.' Harriet was tracing the embroidery on the cushion next to her as she spoke.

'And is Elizabeth happy in her choice to return home and not continue with us?'

'Oh, yes, to be sure, for she loves the farm very much. She did say that she sometimes wonders if she should have stayed here and trained as a Healer, but she likes the work in the dairy, and she thinks she could never be happy anywhere else.'

Mother Goodword was concentrating on tying a knot, so Harriet continued her chatting.

'The South Wind was so beautiful. I should like to be a beautiful Wind fairy, but what do they do, exactly?'

Mother Goodword's fingers paused before she answered. 'They bring change, Harriet. They usher in new seasons and drive out old ones.'

'She came to bring in the autumn then,' said Harriet brightly. 'Only,' she looked at the window and the chestnut tree outside which was already golden. 'Only, autumn is already come.'

'She came to bring a new season to me, Harriet. Which is a good thing. Change is a good thing.'

Mother Goodword did not sound as sure of her words as she usually did, but Harriet must be imagining it. Mother Goodword was the surest person in the whole world.

'Does the change include Mistress Woodhouse becoming a Sister? And me meeting her?'

Mother Goodword granted a slight smile over her work. 'Perhaps.'

'Only imagine,' said Harriet. 'Me at Hartfield. I wonder if I shall go up to the tower!'

THE FAIR MISTRESS OF THE MANSION

Sister Myrtle surveyed the ten expectant faces before her. Ten girls between the ages of eleven and thirteen years, all waiting for her to begin.

‘This morning, girls,’ she began, ‘we’re learning something new.’ She wound her long black hair up into a bun and jabbed the knitting needle into it to hold it in place.

‘A new dance, Sister?’ asked Jenny Wheelwright hopefully.

Myrtle did not deign to reply. Myrtle never danced. She left that to the dance mistress.

‘Will you show us how to make Dust, Sister?’ asked Sukie Potter eagerly.

Myrtle flashed her a disdainful look. No student was allowed near Dust before the age of fourteen. That was Sister Rue’s responsibility, and thank goodness for it. Dust and girls were a dangerous combination.

‘Shall we start a new story?’ suggested Kitty Sitwell, blinking from behind her spectacles.

‘Riddles,’ Sister Myrtle announced. ‘You must come up with five riddles. Work in pairs. And the theme of the riddles is – romantic love.’

‘*Love!*’ The girls turned to one another, pulling faces. Sister Rue’s class adored the theme of romantic love, but Myrtle’s girls were not of that age. They preferred maypole dancing and heroic stories. Romance was not Myrtle’s preferred subject either; she would rather share her current research into river hags and black dogs. But for now, she must endure studying the workings of mortal hearts, which was painfully uninteresting compared to the territorial habits of gytrash.

‘The purpose of this exercise is to engage the wits of the reader and hearer,’ said Sister Myrtle. ‘Not all prospective wards are romantically inclined. If they cannot be reached through the heart or the eyes or stomach, they must be reached through the mind. A romantically themed riddle will engage the intellect and introduce the subject of love. Song, story, speech, letter — the four vessels of words. Riddles are a subcategory of story. An effective riddle employs metaphor, humour, imagery and rhyme in only a few lines, and when combined with the theme of romantic love, can be almost as good as a poem, but far more entertaining and accessible to those of a more prosaic mind.’ Sister Myrtle was reading this description from a creased piece of paper, and was doing her best to inject some enthusiasm into her words.

‘And of course, the most useful thing about riddles and rhymes, are that they train the mind in forming spells.’

Myrtle looked round the room. The girls had stopped pulling faces, but they were not entirely convinced of the merits of love-riddles.

‘Let’s begin with ideas for themes,’ Myrtle said. She clicked her fingers at the chalkboard, and the everlasting stick of chalk poised itself in the air, ready to write.

‘Dancing,’ suggested Jenny Wheelwright. ‘Dancing is supposed to be romantic if you have to dance with a boy, though I don’t know why. They always have sweaty hands at the Midsummer dance.’

Chalk wrote ‘Dancing’ in beautiful script on the board.

‘Princesses,’ chorused Penny and Tuppence, the Abbott twins.

‘Princess dresses,’ added Tuppence.

‘Princess crowns,’ said Penny.

‘Princess slippers,’ said Tuppence.

‘Princess carriages—’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Sister Myrtle. ‘There are other members of royalty other than princesses, however.’

‘But princesses are the most romantic,’ Penny Abbott assured her.

The chalk obliging wrote ‘Royalty’ on the board and added ‘princesses’ in brackets.

‘What else fits the theme of romance?’

‘Hedgehogs,’ offered Tilly Fletcher, an eleven-year-old who wanted to be a Wisewoman. ‘Or chickens.’

‘How do hedgehogs or chickens fit with the theme of romance?’

Tilly Fletcher shrugged. 'I would think it was romantic to be given hedgehogs or chickens. How about flowers? I like flowers too, but hedgehogs are better.'

'Flowers,' affirmed Sister Myrtle, and Chalk wrote it on the board, adding a little drawing of a rose. 'Flowers have long been a language for love. And roses are the particular symbol of romance. When a Godmother makes a successful match and the words of betrothal are exchanged, a messenger sylph is sent to the matchmaker. And what scent does this sylph carry?'

'Roses!' shouted Sukie Potter, who liked to get the answer in before anyone else.

'Correct, Sukie. Who's next? Daisy Moorcroft – something romantic, please.'

Daisy Moorcroft squirmed on her stool and flushed deep red at being singled out. 'Pie,' she squeaked at last. There were giggles in the room, and Daisy threw her apron over her face.

Sister Myrtle quenched the giggling with one of her famous ice-blue glares. 'Do explain, Daisy. And put your apron down.'

Daisy peeped over her apron. 'Farmer Mitchell got wed to Mistress Mitchell on account of her being the best pie maker in all the county,' she said faintly.

There were a few more titters, but Sister Myrtle silenced them. 'Excellent observation, Daisy. Well-prepared food has long been a token of affection and favour, including that of romantic love.' She nodded at Chalk, but it had already written 'Food' on the board and added a representation of a steaming pie. Daisy Moorcroft blushed with pleasure.

'One more idea on the theme of romantic love. Lettice, can you give us one?'

Lettice tossed her long fair plaits behind her. 'Hair,' she declared. 'Ladies in love stories always have beautiful hair.'

There was more girlish laughter.

'Well they do!' said Lettice fiercely. 'They're always brushing their hair and having it curled and decorated with flowers and jewels and things. You couldn't have a romantic heroine who didn't have nice hair.'

Sister Myrtle felt a glimmer of despair, but Chalk had written, 'Beauty' on the board.

‘Of course,’ Sister Myrtle felt bound to add, ‘beauty is comprised of many things other than nice hair. But that is a lesson for another day.’

‘You would have nice hair, if you would arrange it, Sister Myrtle,’ said Lettice examining Myrtle’s crude topknot. ‘A rosemary wash would bring out the shine. I could curl it for you, if you like?’

SISTER RUE’S class with the eldest of the students was going less smoothly than Myrtle’s. The focus of the new autumn term was on weather-making, and Rue had been too impatient to begin with a theory class, so she plunged them all into snow. She thought that she was being patient in starting with snow, as it was generally the least harmful medium; experience had taught her that beginning a class with rain always resulted in a change of clothes all round. Sleet was the most difficult to perfect, and lightning the most dangerous. The girls had all perfected raising dew last term, now they were ready for snow.

‘Go careful,’ Rue advised Cora Chandler as Cora took up Dust for the snow spell.

But Cora’s fingers struggled with being careful and an explosive poof of snow blew up from the large wooden tray and coated both Cora and Sister Rue’s face to the general mirth of the class.

HARRIET’S STUDENTS were thoroughly enjoying her reading to them from *The Thrilling Tales of Orfeosus, the Emerald Knight*. Chalk was in a lively mood that morning, and was drawing illustrations on the board behind Harriet’s head to accompany her reading. When Harriet got to the part where Orfeosus set out to face down the flaming dragon, Chalk drew such a realistic dragon face that the children squealed, and Harriet stopped reading to turn and see the board for herself. Chalk scrubbed out its picture as fast as it had drawn it. It paused, hovering in the air, waiting for the next line.

Little Sarah Dovecote had her hands over her eyes, and Harriet said firmly, ‘I hope you’re not drawing scary dragons again, Chalk.’

‘He is!’ said Henrietta Shepherd.

‘Only pleasant landscapes and heroic characters, Chalk,’ requested Harriet.

‘Sister Myrtle would have let us keep the dragon,’ Isobel Woodman protested.

Harriet chose to ignore this, and raised her voice to read.

‘Sir Orfeosus drew out his magic sword and approached the dark, cave of the dragon’s lair... perhaps we will skip to the next chapter,’ she said, thumbing through the pages. ‘Suffice to say that Sir Orfeosus did slay the dragon and recover the crown from its lair. Now he returns to the enchanted castle with the crown to restore it to the rightful princess.’

‘And marry her,’ added Franny Robert. Please draw her getting married,’ she begged Chalk.

There was a rattle from outside the window, and all eyes turned towards it. A ladder appeared, and the figure of a young man in a workman’s smock began climbing up, while whistling a cheerful tune.

‘It’s Master Martin!’ called the girls. Master Martin was very popular among the students, for he could always be relied on to repair their swing, or bring a basket of fresh-baked scones sent from his sister at the farmhouse, and at Mother Goodword’s behest he would come with his head shepherd, for his head shepherd had the finest voice in the county, and would sing, while Master Martin played his fiddle, and the girls would practise their country dances and enjoy themselves heartily.

‘He’s come to repair a roof tile,’ said Harriet, getting up to look, but changing her mind and sitting down again to finish the lesson. But her eyes would keep drifting to the window.



THE FIRST SCHOOL day drew to an end. Harriet heard all the girls going to their early supper as she and Mother Goodword left the school for their visit to Hartfield.

It was still early enough for daylight; the sun dipping to the west. Mistress Woodhouse’s tower could be seen from everywhere in Highbury, even as far as the end of Randalls Road, which was right on the boundary between Highbury and Donwell. Harriet had often looked up at it as she walked down Highbury Broadway on errands, or walked over the common with her friends. But now she might actually go into it! Might climb the winding stone stairs to Mistress Woodhouse’s turret, where there must be

such a view of all Highbury – no doubt one could see the Martin's farm as clear as could be!

'Oh, how pretty,' Harriet exclaimed as the carriage Master Woodhouse had so kindly sent for them rumbled down the drive to the manor house. 'Oh, I saw a deer, just there, in those trees. Oh, what a pretty stream, oh, look at all those larkspurs, I do so like larkspur, and what are those over there? Those pretty pink and peach ones?'

'Gerbera,' said Mother Goodword. 'And those are gladioli, godetia, and the frothy white ones are gypsophila. One of the garden gnomes took it upon himself to learn his letters, and now he plants all the beds in alphabetical patterns.'

'Gladioli are my favourite! The lawns are so very green. So many flowers, and so late in the year, is it magic?'

'They have excellent gnomes here,' replied Mother Goodword. 'They keep the grounds very well, and the Green Man's influence keeps everything flourishing.'

'Oh, it's so much bigger than I thought it would be. Look how high Mistress Woodhouse's tower is! And so many windows in the house, they look so pretty with the sun shining on them as it goes down. They look as if they were made of fairy gold.'

The carriage circled to a halt before the manor entrance.

'Master Woodhouse has requested that I bring you through the Great Hall, so do not be alarmed by standing under the Green Man,' Mother Goodword warned. 'It is quite usual for persons to stand under him the first time they enter Hartfield. And it is an honour.'

Harriet nodded. She had curled her hair especially for this visit, and her fair curls bounced with her enthusiasm. The carriage door was opened by Master Woodhouse's coachman, and Harriet bounded out.

HARRIET GAVE a little gasp at the carving that greeted them as they stepped into the Great Hall. It filled the vast wall – a carving of the Green Man – a great giant, surrounded by fruit and flowers and birds and woodland creatures. He had many names, as Harriet and everyone in Highbury knew. He was the Green Man, the Wild Man of the Woods, the Lord of May, the Forest Guardian. She dared to look again at the carving, desiring to see if his beautiful consort was to be seen. Harriet could just perceive her. She

stood beyond the Green Man, glimpsed, as though in a distant view, but there she was: The Green Lady. Harriet knew she was distant, because it was the month of October, and the Green Lady, who was also the queen of May, was far from her consort at this time of year. On May Day they would come together in Faerie, as in a wedding ceremony, to usher in the new season of spring.

The face the Green Man bore was uncannily real, and yet so wild and fae, at the same time. 'Is he watching me?' she whispered, shrinking back beside Mother Goodword. 'He looks cross.'

She scanned the wall for any sign of the Door. She knew the Door to Faerie was in this ancient hall somewhere. Master Woodhouse, the Wild Man Guardian, could enter into Faerie when he was summoned by the Green Man. But in all her years in Highbury, Harriet had never heard of Master Woodhouse actually going forth into Faerie. It was said that such a thing was not needed, for the days of an open border between Highbury and Faerie had been closed for a full generation. It was something to do with the Witch of the Woods, but there were too many stories for Harriet to know which was the true one. She had never liked stories with wicked witches or darkling folk. She preferred the fair folk stories of beautiful elves and delightful sprites and the pleasant lands of the Green Lady and her wondrous palace.

Harriet's attention was now distracted by a real figure walking across the hall, her form slight and slender against the giant on the wall, her gown white and gauzy, and a single white flower tucked into her magnificent crown of braids. She looked bright and fresh against the walls of dark, ancient wood.

'You are welcome, Mother Goodword,' said the lady of the manor, coming forward to greet her guests. 'Please share in the bounty of Hartfield and give only a word of thanks in return.'

Mother Goodword bowed her head as a sign of assent. The ancient Guardian greeting was very solemn. Even Harriet's excited energy was subdued as the weighty feel of the Green Man's power settled on them.

'May I introduce Sister Harriet and ask for Hartfield to share its bounty and extend its blessing upon her,' said Mother Goodword, giving Harriet a touch on her elbow to usher her forward.

'Please stand before the Green Man, Sister Harriet,' said Mistress Woodhouse, extending an arm towards the great carving. 'He shall judge

you meet or otherwise to be welcomed.'

Harriet stepped forward to stand beneath the fierce face of the Green Man, and she paled a little, her light blue eyes wide with apprehension.

'Fear not,' the lady of the manor said. 'Do you come with open hands and heart, Sister Harriet?'

'I do,' said Harriet, opening her hands with palms up, just as she had been told by Mother Goodword to do.

'Do you come with an eye that looks for good, an ear that listens for truth, a tongue that refrains from evil?'

'I do,' said Harriet with as much seriousness as she could muster.

'Then you are welcome, Sister Harriet,' concluded the lady of the manor, with a gracious smile. 'Please share in the bounty of Hartfield and give only a word of thanks in return. The spirit of the Green Man has found you fit and meet to partake of his hospitality.'

Harriet moved quickly away, relieved to be released from the stern gaze above her. She returned to Mother Goodword's side, her expression one of relief, and Mother Goodword gave her a look of gentle warning, to remind her not to burst into one of her nervous giggling fits at the close of this welcoming ceremony. Harriet understood her, and put a fluttering hand to her mouth to silence herself as they now followed Mistress Woodhouse across the Great Hall and down a corridor and into a spacious drawing room with arched beams overhead.

'I have offered the blessing to our new guest, Papa,' Mistress Woodhouse said to the elderly man in the chair near the fire. 'And he has been glad to receive her.'

'Oh, that is very good, my dear,' said Master Woodhouse, 'let me see her, oh, she is very pretty. Come here, my dear. What is your name? Maid Harriet. You are welcome, Maid Harriet, Hartfield will share its bounty with you, it is very glad to. Go and sit next to Emma on the couch there, she will look after you, she looks after everyone. Ah, Mother Goodword, you are welcome, come and sit by me, just here, let Emma help you to a little glass of wine, we must not neglect to taste the bounty.'



HARRIET RETURNED HOME to her garret bedroom, perched on the edge of her bed and sighed with contentment. A soft tap at the door sounded, and Rue's sun-browned face appeared in her nightcap. Harriet beckoned her in. Rue had barely closed the door behind her when it opened again, and Myrtle tiptoed in, looking theatrical in her white nightgown with her long black hair round her shoulders.

'So what was it like up at the manor?' asked Rue, putting her candle on the dressing table and sitting on the stool.

'Did you go up to the tower?' Myrtle asked.

'What was *she* like?' said Rue. 'And what did you eat?'

'Oh, it was the most wonderful evening. I did not go up to the tower, but I did stand under the Green Man, the ancient Green Man, only imagine!'

'The Green Man,' said Myrtle longingly.

'The Green Man!' Rue's brown eyes widened. 'Blundering Bearcubs, they say it's a right honour to get the blessing under the Green Man, and no one can stand there if they're not right and honest.'

'I was accepted,' said Harriet happily. 'I was so nervous, for I remembered all the stories about the Green Man seeing into you and knowing if you were a truthful person or not, and I thought I should *die* of fear when I stood there for what felt like ages before Mistress Woodhouse spoke.' She shivered at the remembrance and then giggled nervously, putting her hands to her mouth to stifle the noise, that she might not waken the boarders in the next room.

'Did you see the Door into Faerie?' Myrtle wanted to know.

Harriet shook her head.

'What was Lady Bountiful like?' asked Rue. 'Was she uppity or friendly?'

'Mistress Woodhouse is the most charming person in the whole world,' declared Harriet. 'She was so very affable. I could hardly believe it. She asked me so many questions about myself and what I did at the school, and I told her all about my visit to the Martins this summer, and she was so kind and actually shook hands with me when I left.'

'And what did you eat?' pressed Rue.

'Oh, ever so many nice things. There was scalloped oyster and minced chicken and tiny little eggs, they keep such pretty little bantams at Hartfield, quite as pretty as Mistress Martin's hens, and there was apple tart and custard, and the apples were Donwell apples, and were so *very*

delicious, and there was wine and little sweets and everything so elegant-looking on pretty plates and the wineglasses were crystal, imagine!’

‘Scalloped oyster,’ sighed Rue. ‘Donwell apple tart and custard... oh, Merciful Mushrooms, what I wouldn’t give for a bowl of tart and custard right now.’

‘What is Master Woodhouse like?’ asked Myrtle. ‘He looks so tame when he passes by in his carriage, he doesn’t look like the Wild Man Guardian ought to look.’

Harriet thought for a moment of how to describe Master Woodhouse. ‘He does not seem very *wild*, to be sure. He was very kind. Quite the gentleman.’

‘And is it true that Mistress Woodhouse is considering studying to become a Godmother?’ Myrtle asked.

‘Yes, to be sure.’ Harriet nodded excitedly. ‘And I am to go to Hartfield again tomorrow after breakfast to talk to her all about it.’ She gave a burst of giggles. ‘Just think – two visits in two days!’

LADY PATRONESS

It was a relief to Harriet that she did not have to stand before the Green Man again when she arrived at Hartfield. She did arrive rather breathless and a little dishevelled, for she had gotten distracted several times in admiring the grounds, and then had to make up the lost time by running the last part, but the flowers and shrubs were so lovely, and even the carriageway was so pretty, for the gravel had quartz and mica mixed in with it, so that it sparkled in the soft morning light and looked like a path straight into Faerie.

She had been told the previous evening to come in by the door at the side of the house which led into the family's less formal hallway. It was not so imposing as the Great Hall, and there was no carved giant on the wall watching her and weighing her worth. There was a small carving of the Green Man in his Wild Man form above a side table. A footman assisted her with her cloak, and solemnly hung it up. She smoothed down her hair as best she could, tucking a wayward curl back under her wide band of ribbon.

Mistress Woodhouse's luxurious mass of hair was likely *never* untidy, Harriet thought as the Lady of the Manor came to meet her, looking as fresh and neat and perfect as was possible. Harriet bowed politely, and managed to stifle down a nervous giggle.

'Good morning, Sister Harriet, I am glad you could come.'

'Oh, good morning, Mistress Woodhouse, and I am *so* very glad to be invited.'

Mistress Woodhouse returned Harriet's smile, but Mistress Woodhouse's smile was not a wide grin, making little dimples in each cheek, Mistress Woodhouse's smile was perfectly elegant.

‘My father is taking his morning turns about the grounds,’ said Mistress Woodhouse, gesturing for Harriet to walk with her. ‘We shall sit in the morning room. I have so many questions to ask you, I hope you do not mind?’

‘Oh no, indeed!’ said Harriet, tripping along beside Mistress Woodhouse, whose stride was a little longer than Harriet’s for Mistress Woodhouse was quite tall and Harriet was not.

‘Oh, what a pretty room,’ exclaimed Harriet. She moved to a large window and stood for a moment sighing happily at the view of the gardens. The well-wrapped up figure of Master Woodhouse could be glimpsed between foliage, walking slowly along a shrub-lined path. He carried his Wild Man staff, but Harriet noted that he bore it as though it were a genteel walking stick rather than a sign of authority.

‘It is my favourite room to sit in during the day,’ said Mistress Woodhouse, taking a seat and beckoning Harriet to sit on the elegant little chair opposite. ‘Not that I sit very much during the day, I would sooner be active. I spend much of the evening sitting with my father, so it suits me to be busy the rest of the time. But for now, I am happy to sit a while with you, Harriet, and hear all about becoming a Godmother.’

Harriet took her seat. ‘Oh, Mistress Woodhouse, can you really mean to become a Godmother?’

‘Why should that be surprising?’

‘Oh, only that you are so beautiful, and I hope I’m not speaking out of turn, Mistress Woodhouse, but you seem to me to be just the kind of lady who should marry someone very handsome and rich, like a prince or a duke, you know?’

Mistress Woodhouse gave a little laugh, her hazel eyes crinkling a little. ‘As I do not know any handsome princes or dukes, that is not a likely scenario. I shall not leave my father nor Hartfield. I have a great deal to occupy me here as the mistress, and my position as Lady Bountiful, and I believe becoming a Godmother would suit me very well. So, pray tell me all about it.’

‘Well...’ Harriet thought how best to start. ‘There is quite a lot of work and studying involved. First you learn how to manage small magic, such as good words, little blessings, little spells, and then you begin learning weather craft and all about herbs and roots and such things that can be helpful for small healings, oh, and riddles – learning riddles and rhymes are

very helpful in spell making – there is a book in the library with more than three hundred riddles! To graduate from Sister to Godmother one has to learn lots of other things, such as matchmaking and birth blessings and so on.’

‘I like the sound of matchmaking,’ said Mistress Woodhouse. ‘I do so love to bring about a wedding.’

‘Oh, so do I,’ said Harriet. ‘Though I think it is all much harder than it sounds. We are all wondering over who our wards should be matched with. It feels like quite a riddle to me.’

‘And who is your ward, Harriet?’

‘Oh, I must not say. Mother Goodword says that we must be absolutely careful where secrets of the heart are concerned.’

‘And what does one do when one has reached the rank of a Godmother?’

‘Well...’ Harriet thought hard. ‘There are General Godmothers, and then there are different kinds of guardians at higher grades.’

‘Such as the county Wisewoman, I suppose.’

‘To be sure, but also there are the Grand Godmothers, they are quite powerful and do not need a wand like the Godmothers do. The Grand Godmothers are in charge of the Godmothers, while the Wisewomen are more in charge of looking after the land and nature and things, and then there are the Royal Guardians, they are very high up Godmothers, they have wings and can turn into other forms, and they can help stop wars and things. And there are other kinds of guardians, such as weather watchers and border guardians, and every Godmother has some special gift, such as birth blessings, healings, protections, animal speaking, and, oh, so many other things.’

Harriet took a deep breath after she had finished her long speech. Mistress Woodhouse looked thoughtful and said, ‘I am quite certain I should be well suited to being a Royal Guardian, although—’ she broke off and looked towards the window where her father was walking in the shrubbery beyond. ‘Do Royal Guardians have to travel about the kingdom?’

‘I do not know,’ Harriet admitted. ‘I’ve never met a Royal Guardian. They have wings, when they want them. And they can pass in and out of Faerie. I suppose they do travel about quite a bit.’

‘Then that will not do. Perhaps I shall settle with making matches for now. That sounds like a pleasant occupation. I shall ask Mother Goodword

to begin my studies immediately. When I make up my mind to do something, I like to begin without delay.'

There was an interruption, as a house gnomess came in with a tray of tea things. 'Thank you, Haply,' said Mistress Woodhouse. 'I shall pour the tea.'

Haply nodded her bob-capped head and trotted out again.

The tea was served, and Mistress Woodhouse sat regarding Harriet intently for a minute. 'How is it you do not wish to marry, Harriet?' she asked, still looking at Harriet as though she were examining a portrait before her. 'You complimented me on my beauty, but you must know that you have a delightful beauty of your own.'

Harriet blushed and dimpled and laughed into her teacup.

'When did you know that you were going to choose the life of a Godmother?'

Harriet's expression showed her confusion at this question. 'Well... I cannot rightly say... I suppose I always thought I would be just like Mother Goodword. She is the best person in all the world. And I'm very fond of the children at the school. I love to teach them. I cannot imagine being anywhere else.'

'How is it that you do not have an acolyte name, as the other Sisters do?'

Harriet's confusion deepened. 'I do not know exactly. Mother Goodword says that the Council have yet to give me one. She says there is still some question over my calling that must be settled.' Her head drooped over her cup. 'I think it is because I am not a very good student,' she said. 'I'm a little afraid of magic. But I'm determined to do better this year.'

Mistress Woodhouse looked animated at this news, as though it inspired an interesting and exciting thought.

'I have just had a delightful idea, Harriet.' Her lovely smile flashed across her face as though a sprite had just whispered the delightful idea into her ear. 'My idea is that your future is not yet decided, because you may yet have the future of marriage before you. What do you say to that?'

Harriet stared back and shook her head to show that she had not anything much to say to that idea.

'I have a gift, Harriet. I could not very well be the daughter of the Wild Man Guardian without some fae gift.' She put a hand to her hair. 'My gift is

of foretelling.’ She leaned forward, as though she had a great secret to impart. Harriet mirrored her and leant in.

‘When first I saw you, Harriet, I had a foretelling that you had an excellent marriage before you.’

Harriet gave a little ‘Oh!’ of surprise, and drew back again. ‘And are your foretellings always right?’

‘Invariably. At least my father says so.’ She took a sip of tea and then another smile flashed across her face. ‘Moreover, I have just had another delightful idea. What if you were to be my ward while I am in training? It would be excellent practise for me, and it would aid you in determining your future, would it not? I propose that if I have made you an advantageous match by Midsummer, then I will have done you a good turn, for you will be able to make up your mind one way or the other more decidedly. What do you say to that?’

‘Me, be *your* ward?’

‘Of course, I shall only be a Godmother-in-training, but I learn things very quickly. I was always ahead of my sister in our studies, and she is full six years older than me.’

Harriet stared into her cup. ‘Me, be *your* ward. What would Mother Goodword say? I think the wards have to come from the Council.’

‘I propose we do not mention the idea to Mother Goodword, or anyone else,’ said Mistress Woodhouse. ‘Did you not say that these things ought always to be kept secret?’

‘I have never had a secret from Mother Goodword before,’ said Harriet slowly.

‘Would she not be pleased to know you were exploring your future choices?’ Mistress Woodhouse said. ‘Choosing your future is a decision of the utmost gravity, Harriet. And I do not think you ought to throw yourself into either path without giving full consideration to it.’

‘But the Council,’ said Harriet.

‘It is not an official match,’ argued Emma. ‘It is a practice one.’

‘Mother Goodword did say I must discern my own heart,’ said Harriet gravely. ‘Perhaps you are right, Mistress Woodhouse. Perhaps the choice that Mother Goodword talked of is exactly the one you speak of. Perhaps I do need to consider the choice of marriage.’

‘That is exactly my thoughts,’ said Mistress Woodhouse, as though that settled the matter. ‘Try one of these cakes. Our cook is an excellent baker.’

Harriet was happy to comply, and took the little china plate of cake, with its tiny silver fork. She was aware that Mistress Woodhouse was still regarding her closely.

‘You have just the kind of beauty I admire, Harriet. And such a sweet nature. What man could resist you?’

Harriet blushed, and would have protested, but she worried that she would have cake on her teeth at that moment, for it was so delightfully creamy in the middle.

‘Who are your parents, Harriet?’

Harriet swallowed. ‘I do not know,’ she admitted, putting her hand up to hide her sticky teeth. ‘I was placed in Mother Goodword’s care as a little girl, and nothing was said of where I came from, and I do not remember a great deal about it. Although... I could never forget the *eels*.’ Harriet gave a little shudder and put down her fork.

‘Eels?’

‘Marsh eels,’ said Harriet in a small voice, looking so distressed that Mistress Woodhouse did not press her any further on the subject for the time being. Mistress Woodhouse was not one for venturing into unpleasant subjects.

‘You have not the coarse features of a labourer’s child. You have quite the look of a lady. Surely you are the daughter of well-born parents. There must be some romantic tragedy in your parentage. It cannot possibly be anything base and common, not with such a delicate nose as you have. A nose is a very decided thing in determining the quality of one’s bloodline. I have often observed it.’

Harriet blushed and laughed again and rubbed her nose self-consciously.

‘You merely want a little polish, a little exposure to good society and good manners. Your loveliness simply requires a little finishing to make you quite perfect. I see no reason why you cannot make an excellent marriage. You shall be my ward. It shall be our secret project. I am sorely in need of a project.’

‘Oh, Mistress Woodhouse, you are too kind. But... it would only be a practising exercise. I would only be your practise ward. I really do not think I wish to leave the school and my training.’

Mistress Woodhouse frowned. ‘Take a sip of tea, dear. You have cake on your teeth. We shall call it a practise exercise, just as you say. You shall be my practise ward. But if my foretelling proves correct in the end, I shall not

be taken by surprise.' Mistress Woodhouse bestowed a wise and confident smile on her uncertain new friend.

They finished their tea and cake in silence. Mistress Woodhouse seemed to be thinking things over. Finally, she put down her empty cup and said, 'I thought we might go for a walk. Since my companion and former governess left us to marry, I have been in sad want of a walking companion. Would you do me the kindness, Harriet, and be my walking companion? I am very fond of walking, though I cannot venture beyond the environs of Highbury and Donwell.'

'Oh, Mistress Woodhouse, it would be an honour to be your walking companion!'

'I may send word to you at the school when I need you?'

'Oh, to be sure. I shall come directly whenever you need me, though I have classes to teach in the mornings on weekdays, and I must work on my assignment.'

'Then we shall put on our cloaks, I have not been beyond the shrubbery this past week. We will take the Donwell road, and you may tell me all about your summer, I believe you said you were staying with a family of Master Knightley's tenants?'

PLANS AND PROJECTS

Mistress Woodhouse was like an early summer breeze, drifting into the parlour with her beautiful mass of plaits and ringlets and her elegant coat of mossy green which brought out the colour of her eyes. She really was a treat to look at, Mother Goodword thought. The hint of green in her eyes and the superlative mass of soft brown hair were certainly of fae origin; she could almost rival the West Wind in looks.

‘Thank you for bringing Harriet the other evening, Mother Goodword. She is a delightful creature, and I am happy to make her acquaintance.’

‘Harriet is a very good-hearted girl, Mistress Woodhouse.’

‘I should like to make a companion of her, if you have no objection?’

Mother Goodword tilted her head as though she were thinking over this request while she measured out dried flowers into her teapot.

‘I have no companion now that my former governess has left Hartfield for her own happy establishment.’

‘Mistress Weston was a pleasure to assist.’

‘Assist?’ Mistress Woodhouse frowned. ‘She had no assistance from yourself, I am sure.’

Mother Goodword was too engaged in carefully adding steaming water to reply.

‘It was I who assisted my dearest friend and good Master Weston,’ said Mistress Woodhouse. ‘I encouraged his attentions. I promoted the match.’ She smiled brightly. ‘It is exactly my success in their matchmaking that gives me reason to suppose that I am quite naturally a matchmaker, and thus would make an excellent Godmother.’

Mother Goodword moved to her sideboard where she took down a pair of cups and saucers and brought them to the parlour table.

Mistress Woodhouse frowned again. 'Do you mean to say that *you* had a part in the match?'

'A small one,' said Mother Goodword modestly. 'Little things. A rain shower to prompt Master Weston's gallantry towards Mistress Weston, Maid Taylor, as she was.'

Mistress Woodhouse gave a little gasp. 'That was *you*? That day in Gypsy Lane, when Master Weston *ran* to Farmer Mitchell's for an umbrella? That was the very moment I first thought of them as a good match!'

Mother Goodword nodded. 'That was the beginning. No doubt you felt the first degree of awakening love in that moment, and thus the match occurred to you also.'

'What else?' Mistress Woodhouse looked both interested and piqued at the same time.

'Little soft winds, to stir up softer thoughts, drifts of fragrance to rouse up nostalgia, little poems and songs of romance to remind him of his own romantic heart. All the usual things required to awaken sleeping desires. It did not take much. Master Weston is not one to enjoy living alone. I only had to remind him of this at the right time.'

'Well,' said Mistress Woodhouse, folding her hands decidedly. 'And I was sure the work was all my own.'

'I do not doubt that you had your part in the match,' Mother Goodword said graciously. 'My part was all on Master Weston's side, it was your encouraging influence on Mistress Weston that helped move things along more quickly. And it *was* an excellent match.'

'Yes,' said Mistress Woodhouse, looking happier. 'And speaking of excellent matches, I must say that I have my concerns regarding Harriet.'

'Oh?' It was Mother Goodword's turn to frown.

'Yesterday, as we walked out, we met the clumsiest looking farmer imaginable. Robert Martin, I understand his name is. I was astonished to see how much Harriet blushed and smiled to see him. I understand she is very familiar with him through his sisters. I fear there may be a danger there, one that I, as her friend, do not intend to ignore.'

'The Martin family are very good people,' said Mother Goodword. 'Robert Martin is a sensible young man. But even so, Harriet has chosen the

course of a Godmother, not of marriage.'

'I understand that Harriet has not absolutely determined her course as a Godmother,' said Mistress Woodhouse with the air of someone who is very sure of what they know. 'Therefore, the option of marriage is not entirely eclipsed for her. And as to the Martins, I am sure they are good people in their way, and I have no doubt he is a sensible man. They are tenants of Master Knightley, and he would not retain any tenant who was not of worth, but you must agree that Harriet is far superior in rank to a mere farmer. Perhaps she ought not to spend so much time with such a family, why the brother was positively clownish.'

Mother Goodword gave a warning look to Cloe-Claws, who was making growls from the window seat. 'I would not use such a word as *clownish* in regard to a man such as Master Martin.'

Mistress Woodhouse looked provoked at being contradicted, and opened her mouth to say something in reply, but Mother Goodword handed her a cup of chamomile tea, and said 'Honey?' The honey glowed in the glass bowl, the fae bees made honey that sweetened anyone, dissolving any bitter word or thought.

'Just a little. Thank you.' The moment of tension was diverted. 'It has been interesting talking to Harriet about the school and of what your students learn. If I do commit to becoming a Sister, I would need some way of condensing the learning. I cannot spend ten years studying as the children do before beginning my training.'

'I have already considered that,' said Mother Goodword. 'I shall be glad to give you a series of written classes to ground you in all the foundational studies. I can give you exercises and you will have until Midsummer to know with certainty if the vocation of a Godmother is for you.'

'Written classes?' said Mistress Woodhouse. 'I imagined I would study directly with you.'

'I have to go away,' said Mother Goodword. 'The Council has given me an assignment, and I am unsure of its duration. You can wait for my return or you can begin in the meantime by studying the lessons from the comfort of Hartfield.'

Mistress Woodhouse looked as though she thought it very inconsiderate of the Council to take Mother Goodword away when she wanted otherwise.

'Very well,' she said. 'I shall take them in writing until your return. I dislike delay. Once I make my mind up to a thing I generally do it. So long

as I find I am good at it, of course.' She smiled. 'But I have every confidence that I shall be a good Godmother.'

'It is a vocation, Mistress Woodhouse. It chooses you, not the other way around. If you have the calling upon you, then you will know it in time, and I will do my utmost to help you in that decision. But it is not for everyone.'

'I do not wish to become a teacher, Mother Goodword, I must make that plain. I am sure I am not called to *that*. I like children very well, but I don't think I have the patience for teaching. I recall how troublesome I sometimes was to my own governess – I cannot imagine how trying it would be to oversee ten children at once.'

'The Sisters teach to consolidate their own learning. We shall find other ways to consolidate your lessons.'

'I should like Harriet to join me in my lessons. I know she has completed her foundational studies, but she seems a little vague on some subjects. It might be good for her to refresh her learning, and she is such a pleasant companion.'

'I am in agreement with you, Mistress Woodhouse. It would be good for her to revise them.'

'Excellent,' said Mistress Woodhouse. 'And what shall be our first lesson? Perhaps we could start with matchmaking. That seems to me to be a most worthy subject.'

Mother Goodword shook her head. 'It is important to begin at the beginning. Marriage-making is an advanced study. Weather and nature and inanimate objects are child's play in comparison to the complex workings of the heart. We must begin at the beginning.'

Mistress Woodhouse looked disappointed, but the look passed quickly. Mistress Woodhouse was not a person to dwell long on anything disagreeable, but Mother Goodword's senses prickled. Mistress Woodhouse was not so pliant a character, as Harriet was. There could be trouble ahead.

Harriet came in, fresh and smiling, and making a little bow of greeting to Mistress Woodhouse before taking a seat.

'I have been trying to persuade Mother Goodword to give me my first lesson in matchmaking,' Mistress Woodhouse told Harriet.

'Oh, please do, Mother Goodword,' Harriet begged.

Mother Goodword was about to repeat that it was too advanced a subject for a first lesson, but then it struck her that with so much change in the Winds, it might be wise to advance all her students on. She did not

know how much longer she might be with them. A very elementary lesson could do little harm. Mistress Woodhouse was not a schoolgirl, she was Lady Bountiful of Highbury. Daughter of the Wild Man Guardian, a descendent of the Green Man himself.

‘Very well,’ she agreed.

‘Oh, Mother Goodword, thank you!’ Harriet, clapped her hands and beamed at Mistress Woodhouse.

‘Delightful,’ said Mistress Woodhouse, her composure unaffected, but her eyes glowing with pleasure. Both young ladies bent their heads to listen closely.

‘The first rule of matchmaking is not to impose your own ideas of suitability upon your ward. There are always factors unknown that may make what appears to be a disparate match desirable, and an obvious match undesirable. Such is the nature of love and destiny. A Godmother must always put her own feelings and ideas aside. She is merely a channel through which aid and assistance may flow. She is not the director; she is the facilitator.’

Mistress Woodhouse was nodding, but she looked complacent.

‘I’ve always found this part hard,’ admitted Harriet. ‘It is so difficult to put one’s feelings and ideas aside. I have so very many feelings and ideas, I have them all day long.’

‘It does not sound very difficult,’ said Mistress Woodhouse. ‘But where exactly do we *put* our thoughts and feelings?’

‘Into silence,’ Mother Goodword replied. ‘The most effective strategy I have found for beginners, is to take a line from *The Godmother’s Book of Proverbial Wisdom* and consider it closely without distraction. Do this every day at regular intervals, and you will soon naturally acquire the art of removing your own thoughts from your mind, and becoming highly aware of other people’s energies, and of what is going on around you, both seen and, more importantly, unseen.’

Harriet nodded, but still looked troubled. ‘It is very difficult,’ she murmured to Mistress Woodhouse. ‘

‘What of reason?’ Mistress Woodhouse asked. ‘What of common sense and logic? Are all such things to be disregarded in place of learning to listen and see invisible things?’

‘Reason and common sense are not to be abandoned, but they are not to be relied upon solely. They can only pertain to that which is readily seen

and heard. A Godmother must be able to discern what is unseen as easily as a well-regulated mind can discern what is seen in the natural. Do you understand?’

Mistress Woodhouse looked as though she were pondering this. Harriet looked strained.

‘So,’ began Mistress Woodhouse, ‘it is like moving in two worlds at the same time. It is like having a pair of magical spectacles to put on that you might see what is not usually seen by the ordinary eye. It is like having a magical hearing trumpet, that one might hear what is not heard by the ordinary ear, is that so?’

Mother Goodword nodded her silvery head. ‘Excellent analogy, Mistress Woodhouse. Does that help you, Harriet?’

Harriet frowned and said, ‘I believe so. But... where do we get such spectacles and hearing trumpets?’

‘Oh, Harriet,’ said Mistress Woodhouse, ‘I did not mean an *actual* pair of magical spectacles, though such a thing would be useful... I suppose you do not happen to have such a pair, Mother Goodword?’

‘I do not.’

‘I wish you did,’ sighed Harriet.

‘So,’ resumed Mistress Woodhouse, after taking a sip of her tea. ‘We practise silencing our natural thoughts, we learn to see and hear what is beyond the rational world about us. We must gain a sensitivity to the unseen, something I know a deal of already due to my father’s position. But then what? How does this sensitivity lead us to discerning our ward’s best match?’

‘It enables the Godmother to correctly read the heart of her ward, and those of suitable matches. While she is young in growth, she will also make use of such tools as the forgetfulness cloak and the use of Dust to enhance the senses and make helpful spells.’

‘What if the true love is from afar? How does one discern him or her?’ asked Mistress Woodhouse.

‘That is rather advanced, Mistress Woodhouse. The Council only directs noviciates to local matches. One must move forward one step at a time.’

‘And when shall I have my first official ward? I am eager to begin.’

‘Not yet. You must practise the exercises for a good while. It is a dangerous business to interfere in the movements of the heart before one is ready.’

Mistress Woodhouse almost pouted with displeasure.

‘However, I will give you an exercise that is related to matchmaking which you may enjoy. I wish you to make an observation of the residents of Highbury and Donwell. Keep a record, if you please. You are looking for the very things that a Godmother would notice as a matchmaker. You will record the scent they carry, and I do not mean perfume or a physical smell, I mean the scent of a person’s presence. Listen for words between and beneath their speech, and record anything you hear. Practise feeling their energy. You must spend a good amount of time developing the skill of silence and stillness, as we discussed, in order to do these things. And do not forget taste. Record the taste left in your mouth after a conversation.’

Mother Goodword got up to take a pair of notebooks from a shelf. ‘Will you do this and show me your notes when I return?’

‘Certainly,’ said Mistress Woodhouse, taking a book. ‘But I hope I shall not have to discourse with people I find disagreeable? I hope I may confine my observations to people who are fit to be associated with?’

‘Make a start among your own acquaintance if you choose, Mistress Woodhouse. But a Godmother does not confine herself to societal strata. She is neither beneath nor above any person, mortal or fae. She transcends class and race. She is only concerned with life in all its forms, be it a humble flower sprite or a great king.’

‘Flower sprites are one thing,’ said Mistress Woodhouse, ‘but I was thinking of vulgar milk-maids and ambitious farmers.’ Here Mistress Woodhouse cast a glance at Harriet. ‘There are some people I cannot bear to converse with.’

‘The important thing is to begin somewhere,’ said Mother Goodword patiently.

‘And shall I have the use of Dust and a forgetfulness cloak?’ Mistress Woodhouse smiled brightly, as though wishing to charm the answer she desired.

‘No magic yet,’ was the firm reply. ‘First you must master using your senses, and then you will be ready to take them to the next level with the aid of magic. Without the foundation of disciplining your natural faculties, the additional power of magic is both folly and danger. Do not be deceived. No matter what anyone tells you, there is no shortcut to be gained from magic. It requires wisdom and careful training.’

Mistress Woodhouse did not argue, but she did not look entirely convinced.

‘And what of riddles?’ Harriet asked. ‘You always say riddles and rhymes are good practise for spell making. I have eight riddles in my book now.’

‘Keep up your riddle book, Harriet,’ Mother Goodword said. ‘I am sure Mistress Woodhouse will benefit in helping you with it.’

‘Well. I suppose that concludes our lesson,’ Mistress Woodhouse said. ‘We have our new exercises to work on,’ she held up the cloth-bound notebook. ‘Return to Hartfield with me, Harriet, and we shall make a start directly.’

‘Oh, yes indeed,’ said Harriet, waving her notebook to mirror Mistress Woodhouse. ‘If I may?’ she asked.

Mother Goodword nodded her assent. ‘You are welcome to borrow this,’ she said, holding up *The Godmother’s Book of Proverbial Wisdom*. ‘It will always offer good counsel.’

‘It looks so heavy,’ Mistress Woodhouse said, eyeing the book. ‘I will send our coachman for it.’

‘It looks heavy, but take it and see.’

Mistress Woodhouse took the book and gave a look of surprise. ‘It feels so light!’

Leave-taking was made, and the young ladies departed. Mother Goodword watched them as they passed her parlour window on their way down the path.

‘She has great potential for good,’ Mother Goodword said. ‘But I do not think she is as fit for Godmothering as she believes. Her scent has a pleasing base of strong affection and generosity, but it is somewhat marred by other things. A good sense of self-worth has a pleasant smell, something like bergamot, I have always thought, but where it teeters into pride, it gains a sharp smell. Mistress Woodhouse must learn that her value does not consist in being of a higher rank than others, but in seeing the value in others and using her influence for the good.’

Cloe-Claws gave a purr of agreement.

‘Harriet’s simple heart will draw out Mistress Woodhouse’s appreciation of goodness, and connect her with persons outside of her small sphere. I only hope Harriet can weather the lessons she will learn through this friendship without too much pain.’

Cloe-Claws agreed.

‘It is hard to see them go out into the world and get their hearts a little broken,’ said Mother Goodword.

Cloe-Claws rumbled something else.

‘I know that matters of the heart are not your concern, Cloe, but I also know you are fond of Harriet. You think us mortals excessive in our emotions, and so we are, at times, but would you rather dwell among basilisks and ogres, with no emotion at all?’

Cloe-Claws flicked her tail to say that it was a very foolish thing to suggest; of course she would not rather dwell among those who would sooner eat her than pet her.



SEVEN DAYS FOLLOWING Harvest Moon found the three Sisters gathered in the hall; they were still in their nightgowns and caps and shawls, for it was a little before dawn. Myrtle clutched a copy of *The History of Merfolk: from the Atlantis Age to Modernity* with a yearning expression.

‘I hope to be gone only a short while,’ Mother Goodword said in parting. She spoke briskly, which was a sign that she was subduing softer emotions. ‘I have the utmost confidence that you will keep your morning classes running smoothly, and be diligent in making progress with your current assignment. Make direct contact with your wards by conversation. It is a good place to start, and there is much to be gleaned from every conversation if you are alert.’

‘I wish I could come with you and study merfolk,’ Myrtle said.

‘I wish you were not going away,’ Harriet mourned.

‘I wish I could travel south,’ said Rue. ‘I’ve never been south. Or north. Or anywhere much.’

They followed Mother Goodword to the entrance courtyard just as the first light of dawn caused the external lamps to look dimmed. The chestnut tree sprite could not resist throwing leaves over them, but he did so with restraint, seeing as Mother Goodword and Cloe-Claws were of the party. A soft fall of russet leaves floated down over them in a little leaf shower.

‘You will come back soon,’ Harriet said with a tremor in her voice. Mother Goodword took hold of her fingers and squeezed them.

‘Keep up your studies with Mistress Woodhouse, dear. And look after my plants. You know how fond of my sprites I am. Busie doesn’t care for them herself.’

‘I will,’ Harriet promised.

‘Keep up the protection charms,’ Mother Goodword said to all three Sisters. ‘Especially on the storeroom. There are some highly prized ingredients in there.’

The Sisters were distracted by the rumbling sound, as though thunder were rolling up the road and into the courtyard.

‘The South Wind’s carriage,’ cried Rue, lifting up and down on tiptoes with excitement as the pair of golden horses pounded the earth before slowing to a halt in the courtyard. They folded their wings back to their flanks, turning round so the carriage was now close to the school entrance.

‘I must not keep the horses waiting,’ Mother Goodword said, as Harriet clung to her hand. ‘Goodbye.’ Mother Goodword looked unusually choked for a moment. She recovered and put a hand lightly on Myrtle’s shoulder. ‘Myrtle, study is valuable, but don’t shut yourself away. Share what you know with others. Work together.’

Myrtle gave a nod, and clutched her book more tightly.

‘Harriet, remember what I said about choices. Only you can determine your calling. Learn to discern your own heart, and not just that of your ward’s.’

Harriet opened her mouth to ask questions, but Mother Goodword had released her hand and stepped nearer to the carriage. She had to raise her voice a little above the increasing wind.

‘Rue, remember rules are there for good reason.’

Rue was about to say something in reply, but Mother Goodword was at the carriage door; the wind blew back the hood of her cloak, and her gown whipped about her legs. ‘Practise your senses every day. Use the forgetfulness cloaks, and don’t waste Dust on trivialities.’ This last comment was directed at Rue.

The aerie-sylph coachman was holding open the door, and Mother Goodword had one foot on the carriage step.

‘You activated the Dust I mixed?’ Rue called.

‘Yes,’ replied Mother Goodword. Cloe-Claws gave a protesting yowl. ‘No,’ cried Mother Goodword, removing her foot and whirling round. ‘I did not complete the activation! Oh dear, there is no time now.’

‘We cannot manage without Dust!’ cried Rue and Myrtle together.

Mother Goodword hesitated; the horses snorted with impatience. She pulled out her wand from her pocket. She had felt the new wand humming into life as soon as the carriage had appeared. ‘Take care of it,’ she urged, as Rue rushed forwards to grasp it, and sprang back again, for the wind whirling about the carriage was gathering force.

‘Take this,’ Mother Goodword said, moving against the wind to put the key to her desk in Harriet’s hands, for she stood nearest. ‘Lock the wand away when you have finished the activation.’

Rue grinned at the wand in her hand, while Harriet looked anxiously at the key in hers.

The glittering carriage flashed iridescent, like sunlight on rain drops. The coachman shut the door and flew upwards to his seat. The command was given to the restless horses, and thunder broke out as the carriage leapt forward and was gone from sight, leaving a trail of rainbows in its wake.

Harriet could only comfort herself with talk of tea. Myrtle sighed with longing as the carriage disappeared, and announced that she was returning to the library to finish her book.

Rue stood for a moment, looking at the wand in her hand. ‘I feel like a real Godmother,’ she said. ‘Think of what I could do...’

‘Rue!’ warned Harriet, though her soft voice sounded more like a caress than a caution. ‘Take the key and lock it away.’

‘Alright,’ said Rue, pocketing the key. ‘Yes, I know!’ she said to Cloe-Claws who was trotting close at her heels and talking in growls. ‘I’ll go and activate the Dust, and then it will be locked away, alright?’

A NEW OBJECT OF INTEREST

‘Oh, Mistress Woodhouse, where shall we begin?’ Harriet looked at the blank first page of her notebook.

‘We have two projects now, Harriet.’

‘We do?’

‘Our first project is to observe people in Highbury, to practise our senses.’

‘And the second project?’ queried Harriet. ‘My riddle and rhymes book?’

‘No. We shall continue with that, as it is good practise for future spell making. My second project, Harriet dear, is *you*.’

‘Me?’

‘As my practise ward.’

‘Oh, yes.’ Harriet laughed. ‘Though I’m sure I can’t think who you would match *me* with. I have thought ten-hundred-thousand times of it, but I cannot think of anyone. But, of course,’ she added, ‘I am only a practise ward. Not a *real* one.’

Emma ignored these last words, and said, ‘I have an excellent notion of who would be a good match for you. But I will do as we have been bid, and carry out a little observation first.’

‘So, it is a secret?’

‘For now.’

‘And how long shall you observe for before you decide?’

‘Oh, I dare say a few observations are all that is needed. How hard can it be?’

‘I’m sure it would not be hard for you, for you are so clever, but I don’t know where to begin with my match. Mother Goodword said to begin with conversing with our wards.’

‘Well, I have plenty of opportunity to converse with you. Now we’ll begin with our exercises. We shall take a line from the book that Mother Goodword so obligingly lent me and sit in silence while we consider it and practise stilling our thoughts.’

‘Very good, Mistress Woodhouse. I’ve always had trouble with stilling my thoughts, so it would be good to practise. I do practise every day, when I remember, but I get distracted. Which line shall we choose?’ Harriet leaned over the table where the book lay. She turned over the cover and ran a finger lightly down a page. ‘*She who matchmakes without direction will take a wrong turn.*’ Harriet looked up with a stricken expression. ‘Is it a warning?’

‘No, indeed,’ said Emma, coming to stand beside Harriet, and turning the page. ‘We are only practising. It does not apply to us.’ Her finger hovered over the book and fell randomly on a line.

‘*She who hastens against counsel, hastens to regret.*’ She turned the page quickly and selected another line. ‘*Closed ears hear no wisdom.* That’s a silly proverb.’ She attempted once more. ‘*Even a donkey is considered wise if it listens to instruction.*’ She snapped the book shut. ‘How are we to focus our minds on such things? Donkeys and regrets indeed!’

Harriet reopened the book. ‘This one is nice,’ she said. ‘I have used this one before. *A faithful heart brings its own reward.* I like that. Is that not pretty?’

‘Pretty enough,’ said Emma. ‘It will do. I think we shall go up to the tower to practise.’

‘Oh, yes, I long to see the view from the tower.’

‘We shall not be looking at the view, Harriet, we shall be meditating on wise sayings. I thought we might sit up there, for we shall be in no danger of being interrupted.’

HARRIET RAN to the window of the tower and leaned against the deep stone sill.

‘Oh, what a view! I never could tire of it.’ She was still panting a little from the exertion of the climb. Emma came to stand beside her while she

recovered her breath.

‘One can see as far as the city,’ exclaimed Harriet. ‘It is but a blur, but surely it is the city. And that tiny line must be the Great River that flows through it.’

‘No Harriet, that is our own River Don. However, it does join with the Great River. The city is beyond that blue line, see? No, that way, Harriet. You are looking towards Kingston.’

‘May I look through the spyglass?’ Harriet took up the spyglass from its case and squinted through it. ‘Oh, I can see everything as clear as can be! There is the school! That chestnut sprite is being rude again. He’s throwing things at the girls walking underneath, but he ought not to throw them at Sarah Dovecote, she is a dear little thing, oh, here comes Sister Rue, she will give him a scolding.’ She swung the spyglass to look elsewhere. ‘There is Mistress Baytes, walking down the Broadway. She is going to the bakery, no doubt. Oh, it is Master Elftyn! How well he looks, he always dresses so nicely. No doubt he is on his way to do some good deed. He is very good, he visits the poor every week, you know.’

‘That is his work,’ said Emma. ‘Being entrusted with the charitable offerings of the village. But I am glad to hear you think well of him.’

‘Oh, I can see Abbey Mill Farm! I cannot see anyone of the family, but I can see the cows in the home meadow as clear as day!’

‘Let’s begin our lesson now,’ said Emma. She sat down on a bench and patted the cushion beside her.

‘What a wonderful spyglass this is,’ said Harriet, putting it down with reluctance. ‘It is a marvel that one can see so far and so clearly.’

‘It’s fae made,’ said Emma. ‘Come and sit down. Now, what was that proverb we were to meditate on?’

‘A faithful heart brings its own reward,’ repeated Harriet.

‘Let us begin.’

‘It’s so nice to have someone to practise with,’ said Harriet. ‘Rue and Myrtle will not sit with me any more during practise.’

‘I suppose we ought to close our eyes,’ Emma said.

‘Yes, to be sure. We must close our eyes, concentrate on the words, and empty our minds of our own thoughts.’ Harriet repeated what she had been taught. ‘We must be perfectly still in thought and body.’

‘Let us begin,’ said Emma.

Half a minute later Emma said, 'Harriet, please stop saying the words aloud, you said stillness and silence. Say the words in your mind.'

'Sorry. I didn't realise I was saying them aloud. I do that sometimes.'

Half a minute later.

'Harriet, speaking under your breath is still speaking aloud, I can hear you.'

'Sorry. I did think I was speaking in my mind.'

A minute later.

'Harriet why are you giggling?'

'Oh, forgive me, Mistress Woodhouse, but I was speaking the words in my mind and they were jumbling up and they came out as *reward a heart its own*, and then, *faithful reward brings a heart*—'

'Harriet, please be silent, or we cannot proceed. We shall sit for fifteen minutes. I have reset the sand timer.'

'I shall be absolutely silent, indeed I will.'

A minute later.

'Please do not keep yawning.'

'Sorry, Mistress Woodhouse, but sitting silently makes me feel so sleepy. I've given up thinking of the words, for they will jump around. Goodness, how much sand is left, it feels like half an hour already, yet it is barely five minutes.'

'Try harder, Harriet.'

Silence fell again for a minute.

'Do cease fidgeting.'

'Sorry.'

Another minute passed. Harriet sneezed. 'Sorry!'

'Well, I think that will do for this morning.' Emma gave up at last. 'We did not manage a quarter of an hour, but I suppose we can work up to that. Let's continue our lesson in another form. We'll compose another rhyme for your riddle book.'

'Oh, yes!' Harriet jumped up, glad to be released from the strain of sitting still. But then her face fell. 'I left my book downstairs. Shall I go all the way down to come all the way back up?'

'We'll go down together and make a list of the persons in Highbury to observe, and then we shall work on your book.'

Harriet snatched one last peek out of the spyglass before she left. 'How big the world looks when you look from so high up!' she marvelled. 'I

wonder, Mistress Woodhouse,' she said, as they filed down the steps, 'I wonder that you never travel outside Highbury. If I were like you, with a carriage and horses, I am sure I should like to travel.'

'Where would I go?' They reached the sitting room, and Emma gathered up paper and ink to compose their list.

'Should you not like to go to the city? To see the shops and the ballrooms and the royal gardens and palace? Your sister is in the city, is she not? I wonder you never go to stay with her.'

'I have no need to travel abroad,' said Emma. 'What is there beyond Highbury which I do not have here?' She looked thoughtful as she sat down and opened the lid of the ink jar. 'It *would* be nice to visit Isabella and the children. But I cannot leave Highbury, even if I wished it.'

'What a pity. I should like to see the city very much. I think everybody should see the city at least once. I suppose you cannot leave because your father does not like to travel? I should have thought he would like to visit your sister.'

'I suppose it is a little odd,' Emma admitted. 'There is a story connected to it. I'm surprised you have not heard of it, being so long in Highbury.'

'There was a story about a witch who had cursed you,' said Harriet, sitting down with a bounce. 'But one never knows which of the stories are true. Was there a witch?'

'There was. There still is, I believe.'

'Oh, do tell! I love to hear a story.'

'We never speak of it as a rule,' said Emma. 'Papa does not like to talk of it.' She looked over at the door, as though to be sure her father was not coming into the room or walking by. 'It all began with my mother. She had a very strong yearning for a particular salad green when she was expecting me. My father would do anything for my mother, just as you have observed he would do anything in the world for me.'

'Except let you travel abroad,' said Harriet, in such an innocent tone, that Emma could not mistake it for any reproach on her father. 'And so?' Harriet said, when Emma sank into thought again. 'And so, your father got your mother some of the special salad leaves?'

'Yes. But it was a difficult thing to procure. It was a type that only grows in Faerie. And it was not always available to buy in the weekly market. And so my father did something he regrets. Bitterly regrets.'

‘Oh, Mistress Woodhouse, what did he do? I cannot believe for one moment that your father would do anything bad!’

‘No, it was not bad. It was... unfortunate. Perhaps foolish, in hindsight.’

‘Did he *steal* it? He surely did not steal it!’

‘Not precisely. He paid for it, he bought it in good faith... but then, one ought never to put one’s faith in a roamer.’

‘Oh, dear me, no! Mother Goodword tells us *never* to buy anything from a roamer when they pass through. One never knows where they have gotten their wares from.’

‘My father bought some of the particular salad from the roamer, but it turned out to have been stolen from the garden of a witch.’

‘Oh no! Dear Mistress Woodhouse, that is too horrible!’

‘And not just any witch. *The* witch.’

‘Which witch do you mean?’ Harriet’s eyes widened. ‘The Witch of the Woods? Or the Sorceress of the West, or The Hag of the Forest?’

‘I think they may be all one and the same, Harriet.’

‘They are?’ Harriet’s eyes widened further. Then she looked a little relieved. ‘Perhaps it is a good thing that there is but one wicked witch, and not three in all. But, oh! She is said to be *very dreadful*. And your father had something that was *stolen* from her.’

‘He did not realise,’ said Emma. ‘Not until some days later, when my mother had eaten up all the leaves, and then the witch came to the door and demanded her produce back.’

‘But he could not give it back, for it had been all eaten up! Whatever did he do?’

‘He offered to pay her, and to pay her well. He did not permit her to enter the house, of course, and she should never have been able to enter the grounds at all, but that she had some legal right over him in that he had acquired something stolen from her garden.’

‘But he did not know! He would never have bought it, had he known!’

‘The witch is not known for fairness,’ said Emma.

‘She is wickedly unfair beyond words,’ said Harriet sagely.

‘She would accept no reasonable payment,’ continued Emma. ‘She claimed that the herb had great value, that to eat it would impart great beauty and charm and the most beautiful hair imaginable to the eater. She said that such impartation would be diverted to the child in his wife’s

womb, and she demanded that he give her the child that was to be born to him, that she might regain her precious herb.'

'How shocking! But, of course, he did not – he would not!'

'He would not.'

'And what did she do?'

'She cursed him. She cursed his family. She said that should his child be found outside the protection of the Green Man's domain this side of the border, she would take the child as her due payment. She vowed that she would gain me. And then she left.'

'What a *dreadful* tale.'

'And so, my father insists that I take no step outside the protected boundaries of our little village. While I was small, I was often confined to the tower for my own safety, which was most tedious. But time has allayed my father's fears in part, and I have not been immured there since the last rumour of the witch being sighted near the border. But I shall never leave the environs, for while I have no fear of some old crone and her faulty logic, I would not grieve my father for the world.'

'And that is why your hair is so long, and so beautiful,' said Harriet, looking admiringly at Emma's crown of glossy braids. But your poor mother, did the witch have anything to do with her being lost to you?'

'My father thinks so. He believes the shock caused my mother to grow unwell, leading eventually to her demise. Master Perry, who attended upon her, said that it was an unusual form of pneumonia that no tonic could treat. Papa sent for the best Healer in the kingdom. But she came too late.'

'Oh, Mistress Woodhouse, that is the saddest story I have ever heard.'

Emma looked sad for some moments. But she soon gave herself a little shake, dipped her pen into her ink and said, 'Now then, who shall we begin with to practise our sensing exercises on?'

Harriet sat up straight in an attitude of attention. 'What about Mistress Ford?'

'Mistress Ford? Why of all people should you choose her?'

'Because... earlier we were talking of fashionable ladies in town, and so I thought of fashion, and thus I thought of Ford's and their window display, which always has a very nice new fashion piece in, and so I thought of Mistress Ford.'

'We should think of someone eligible for matchmaking,' said Emma. 'What is the point of beginning with someone who's not free to be

matched? Mistress Ford has long been married.'

'Indeed,' laughed Harriet. 'To Master Ford these twenty years or more.'

'Harriet, do be serious. Think of someone, a young lady... or young man... who is eligible.'

Harriet pursed her lips. 'Master Wallace?' she offered. 'He is not married.'

'To be sure, he is not,' cried Emma. 'And not likely to be, with such vulgar manners. Think of someone gentlemanlike.'

'I suppose the Perry's boy is too young?'

'Indeed. He cannot be above twelve. Try again. Picture Highbury broadway, Harriet. Venture past Ford's, in your mind's eye. Walk past the Perry's, past the road to the village boys' school, where else do you see?'

'Um,' said Harriet, closing her eyes tightly. She laughed. 'This is like trying to concentrate on a proverb, is it not? Only this time I am trying to concentrate on seeing something.'

'And what do you see? You are walking past the school. Can you see the railings which run all around it?'

'Oh, yes. I see them. And I see the pretty line of birch trees that grow to the side of the lane, and I see the ditch which fills with water after rain, and Lizzie Coster stepped into it once, for she was tricked by a will-o-wisp that had come in with the mist, and fortunately she was wearing galoshes, but even so, her stockings were quite soaked through, and she said she was cross enough to—'

'Harriet! We are not talking of your school friends, nor of troublesome fairies, we are thinking of something very important. Do concentrate, dear.'

'Forgive me.'

'You are rounding the corner of the lane—'

'Do I turn off to the footpath across the common?'

'No, you stay on the lane. You round the corner—'

'There is a lovely lilac tree by the stile, and foxgloves grow all along the bank there every summer. I only think it is a pity that foxgloves are too large to pick and put in a vase.'

'Harriet, it is autumn. There are no foxgloves. Do you see the gate to your right? See the neat little garden beyond it. Perhaps the owner is coming up to the gate just as you are walking by, perhaps you can hear the owner calling out a greeting to you. Can you see who it is?'

Harriet squeezed her eyes harder. ‘Oh, Mistress Woodhouse, I think I can see ...it is...’

‘Yes, Harriet?’

‘It is...’ she opened her light blue eyes and looked with confusion at Emma. ‘It is little Jack Napes, from the cottage round the bend, but I do not think their garden very neat, not one bit.’

‘Oh, Harriet,’ groaned Emma, ‘You walked right past it. Recall whose house is around the bend in the lane. A little old-fashioned to be sure, but very neat, with a door with a knocker in the shape of a—’

‘A duck!’ cried Harriet.

‘I believe it is a swan.’

‘With the prettiest yellow-dyed curtains at the window!’

‘And *he* is?’

Harriet blushed and laughed. ‘Why, Master Elftyn, of course. Who else lives in a little cottage with a duck knocker and curtains the colour of primroses? Master Elftyn, to be sure.’ A sudden thought seemed to strike her. ‘Oh, Mistress Woodhouse, do you mean...?’

‘I am suggesting we choose Master Elftyn as our first person to practise on. I will invite him for tea. Here, I write his name at the top of our list, and you shall likewise write his name in your notebook, ready for marking down your observations. I will write a note of invitation directly.’

MATCHMAKING

Harriet had decided she must be brave. It had been some days since Mother Goodword left them, and she had not yet spoken with her ward. She finished her morning class, and announced at lunch that she was setting off to find Master Knightley.

Rue reminded her to put on her forgetfulness cloak and suggested she take some Dust, and Myrtle had advised taking a notebook and pencil to record any observations. Harriet took the cloak and notebook, but decided against the Dust. It would take all her courage just to speak with the great man, she could not think of making up spells at the same time.

MASTER KNIGHTLEY WAS BEMUSED to find he had a shadow. A little, fair-haired shadow, with light blue eyes and a nervous look, who was occasionally pausing to scribble something in a notebook. He saw her follow him all the way down the Broadway. When he called in at Ford's to see if his order had come in yet, his fair-haired shadow stood behind the umbrella display, peeping out at him. When he called in at the post office she hovered outside, pretending to be looking in at the bakery window opposite, but she was clearly waiting for him. When he turned down the lane behind the apothecary to take the footpath across the common back to Donwell, she trotted behind,

'May I help you, Maid...?' he said, finally rounding on her as she followed him over the stile into the footpath.

‘Oh, no, I thank you,’ stammered the young lady, scrabbling over the stile. ‘But if you would not mind giving me a moment of your time, I should be very grateful.’

‘Certainly,’ Master Knightley said, wondering where he had seen her before. She was familiar, but he could not quite place her. Was she the young lady he had seen walking with Emma recently? ‘But you will have to walk, I am already late.’

The young lady hurried to keep almost apace with him. This was peculiar behaviour, and he wondered if she was a little unstable, though she seemed harmless enough.

‘I just wanted... I wished... I hoped... I...’

‘Out with it,’ Master Knightley said briskly, but not unkindly. ‘Mind that patch of nettles, Maid...?’

‘I should like to know...’ the young lady gave an *ouch* as a tall nettle grazed her hand.

‘Give it a good rub,’ said Master Knightley, bending down to pluck a dock leaf.

‘Thank you. So very kind.’

‘Now, how can I oblige you?’

‘If you please, sir, could you tell me what are the characteristics of an excellent wife?’

Master Knightley stopped mid-stride to turn to her. ‘I beg your pardon?’

She blushed and squirmed at his direct look. ‘Oh, do not mistake me, sir, it is for educational purposes that I ask.’

‘Educational?’

‘I am studying the qualities of a good matrimonial partners. Not for myself,’ she added hastily. ‘It is a project. At the school.’

‘The school? Ah, so that is where I have seen you. You are one of Mother Goodword’s pupils, are you not?’

‘I am. Would you be so kind as to answer my question?’

‘Ought you to be walking the fields alone asking unmarried men about matters of matrimony? It seems most singular.’

She blushed again. ‘I am sorry if it appears so, sir, but it really is a matter of importance. And I am not alone.’

‘You are not?’ He looked at the footpath beyond, leading to the stile they had just crossed, but could see no one.

‘My companion follows behind.’ She pointed to the tall grass a little behind her, and the shape of a very large, silver and black tabby cat could be seen sitting among the hillocks. ‘I don’t know why she follows me today,’ the girl added with a little shrug, ‘but she does that sometimes of late.’

Master Knightley took out his pocket watch and glanced at it. ‘I’m rather late for an appointment,’ he said. ‘I must get on.’

He was about to turn away when the silvery tabby caught his eye. He could not say why, but it was a very compelling look. It was a very compelling cat. Only fae cats had that enormous size and that distinct glow to the eyes and fur. He had a respect for fae guardians, so he remained standing and said to the young lady. ‘Very well, I will answer your question, odd as it is, and then I must be on my way.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ gushed the girl, opening her little book and holding her pencil in readiness.

‘The characteristics of an excellent wife,’ said Master Knightley, frowning a little in concentration. ‘Truthfulness. Intelligence. Kindness. An open temper. And if she be musical, that is an advantage.’ He smiled a little at this last point, for it was partly a joke, but the young lady was assiduously writing every word down.

‘Does that answer your query?’

‘Oh, yes, thank you, sir, but... may I ask... what of beauty? What kind of beauty do you regard?’

He blinked at her question, and was about to say something dismissive in reply, but that silvery cat caught his eye again, and he felt compelled to answer honestly, even though it was a question bordering on the ridiculous. He had never thought about such a thing. Beauty? What kind of beauty?

An image rose in his mind – that of a young woman dressed in white, walking with sure, swift steps to meet him with a smile. A woman of graceful stature, with a mass of light brown hair and laughing hazel eyes...

‘Beauty is... most subjective,’ he said, not wishing to share what he had just envisioned, for the image had startled him. He had not known that his definition of beauty was bound up so completely in *her* until that moment. But the silvery cat caught his eye again and gave him that knowing look. What a peculiar morning this was turning out to be. He tried again.

‘Beauty, as I would regard it, undoubtedly resides in a pleasing face and figure, I cannot deny it, I doubt anyone could. But such external beauty can

be nothing if there is not also the inner beauty of a true and generous heart.'

The young lady was scribbling hard. Master Knightley looked at the silver tabby and was glad to see that it looked mostly satisfied with his answer.

'So, you do not prefer light hair over dark? Tall over short? Blue eyes over brown?'

'I do not.' The cat fixed him with a firm look, but he was not going to be pressed into saying any more. A man must be allowed some privacy of thought.

'Now I must bid you good day, Maid...?'

'Good afternoon, sir, and thank you most kindly for giving me a moment of your time.' She bowed and hurried back the way she had come.

'Good day to you,' he said to her departing figure. The characteristics of an ideal wife indeed!

He saw her put up the hood of her plain, grey cloak, and suddenly he could not recall who the stranger was that was now hurrying away, nor what it was they had been talking of; there was only the feeling of some new feeling having been awakened.



'HOW DID YOU FARE?' Rue called out when Harriet returned to the school, flushed but pleased with herself. Rue was in the bee garden. She came up to the gate, lifting her beekeeping veil from her face.

'I did it!' Harriet exulted. 'I was so nervous, I almost turned back when he turned down Green Lane, I was about to give the scheme up, for I knew he would take the walk over the fields back to Donwell, and I had not my boots on, but Cloe-Claws made me follow him, so I did, and I did not forget to put my forgetfulness cloak up when I left.'

'But did you ask him?'

Harriet nodded, colouring more deeply at the remembrance of it.

'And?'

Harriet pulled her little book out of her pocket and read from it.

'Truthfulness, intelligence, kindness, open temper, musical ability. He has no preference for eye or hair colour.' The triumph faded from her face.

'It is rather a vague description.'

Rue was disappointed too, but only for a moment. 'The music is a good clue. And intelligence means she's got to be educated. Not being particular about her looks makes it easier.'

'It does?' said Harriet doubtfully.

'Any good-tempered lady who's educated and musical and don't look like a donkey will do. It can't be too hard to find such a match.'

'But he's so very important. He must want someone equal in rank.'

'Not at all,' argued Rue. 'A rich man needs no rich wife when he has plenty already. He could marry anybody. Who's on your list?'

Harriet turned to another page in her notebook and read: 'Anne Cox, May Martin, Charlotte Gilbert. There's also Mary Stokes, but she's not very pretty.'

'Nor educated,' said Rue. 'Only May Martin and Anne Cox are educated. May's a bit young to be thinking about marriage.'

'She's only fifteen,' agreed Harriet.

'As for Anne Cox,' said Rue, 'She might've had some schooling, but she ain't what I'd call intelligent. Is she musical?'

Harriet shook her head.

'There must be someone else.' Rue rubbed her chin through her veil.

'Oh, I knew this would be impossible,' moaned Harriet. 'It nearly killed me to talk to him, I thought I should die when he turned to me and spoke, and it was all for nothing.'

'Don't worry. We got to think again, that's all. We'll talk to Myrtle about it. There's got to be someone, or Mother Goodword wouldn't have given him for a ward.'

Harriet nodded and forced a smile. A bee the size of her thumb drifted lazily through the air, and so she made a hasty retreat to the school.

'Come on you,' Rue said to the bee. 'Time to tuck you up, winter's coming, don't you know?' The bee ignored her, and Rue glanced around before pulling out something from the pocket of her work apron. '*Off to bed, little pest, time for sleep, time to rest,*' and waved the wand over the bee. The bee did as it was bid, but not before chasing Rue around the hive three times. 'I take it back! – you ain't a pest – I were rhyming in a hurry!'

When the hive was closed and the danger of an angry bee removed. Rue looked down at the wand and laughed at herself. 'Oh, what fun not to have to fiddle about with Dust!' Then she remembered she was not supposed to use the wand for anything other than the Dust activation and she shoved it

back into her pocket, hoping that Cloe-Claws was not close by enough to smell the magic.

‘I shall go and put it away,’ Rue said out loud to herself. ‘Right now.’ And she left the bee garden, whistling a summery tune as the autumn leaves scrunched under her feet. But on reaching the school side entrance she hung her bee-keeper hat on the doorknob, recalling that she wanted to talk to Elizabeth Martin that afternoon, so she twirled round and marched off in the opposite direction. ‘I’ll put it away just as soon as I come back,’ she announced to no one in particular.



THE THREE SISTERS took counsel together in their little sitting-room that evening. They’d all had a busy day, teaching classes in the morning and working on their assignments in the afternoon.

‘I walked over to see Lizzie Martin this afternoon,’ Rue reported. ‘I had a good long gossip with her about all kinds of things.’

‘About marriage?’ Harriet asked.

‘Mostly about cows. She’s having problems with one of her milkers not producing.’

‘What did you suggest?’ Harriet asked.

‘Marigold milk in the water.’ Rue smiled to herself as she remembered the little spell she had made over the cow when no one was looking. It was a good feeling to know that she had secretly helped her friend with just a few words and a quick wave of the wand.

‘But did you find any clue as to her match?’ asked Myrtle, peering over the enormous book she was holding. ‘That was what you went to see her for.’

Rue screwed up her face as she recalled their conversation. ‘I tried. I said our assignments this term was in matchmaking.’

‘And?’

Rue made another face. ‘She laughed. And said she hoped she weren’t no one’s ward. She didn’t want no matchmaking nonsense.’

‘But why did Mother Goodword give her to you as a ward if she does not want to be matched?’ exclaimed Harriet.

‘I don’t know,’ said Rue. ‘I’m wondering that myself.’

‘I’ve been looking through the library on the subject of matchmaking,’ said Myrtle, tapping the heavy book. ‘I found this.’ The book was well-worn with yellowed pages. The title on the spine read: *The Godmother’s Manual to the Many Mysteries of Matchmaking*.

‘It’s rather old-fashioned,’ said Myrtle. ‘But it has some interesting points. Listen to this.

‘Oftentimes it canst be found that a ward doth speaketh aloud, for all the birds of the air to heareth, that they should wish to marry, or speaketh it quietly in their heart, for all the goodly spirits that watcheth over them to knoweth, and thus their Godmother doth heareth this through means of Council and makes of them a ward.

Yet the ward hath not yet heardeth their own heart, to realise that it is indeed their heart’s desire to be enjoined with their destined true love for their mutual hearts’ comfort.

In such cases the Godmother must showeth great care in working in the secret places, and showeth great patience in awaiting the awakening of their ward’s hearts.’

‘Oh, this is going to be harder than I thought,’ groaned Rue. ‘A ward that don’t even know her own heart, and I’ve to find out who her true love is!’

‘Me too,’ squeaked Harriet. ‘Master Knightley looked positively...’ she struggled for the right word to describe the look on tall, brisk Master Knightley’s face, ‘he looked quite... *bemused*. As though he’d never thought of marriage until that moment, and was not best pleased about having to think of it. And I don’t have one single person on my list who fits his description of a good wife.’

‘What about your ward, Myrtle?’ Rue asked. Myrtle was engrossed in leafing through the deckle-edged pages of the book. ‘Did you speak to Hannah Hazeldene this afternoon?’

Myrtle dragged her eyes from her book. ‘What? Oh, yes, I did. Cloe-Claws made me. I walked out to Randalls to see her.’ She dropped her eyes back to her book.

‘Well? Tell us what happened.’

Myrtle looked up again. ‘Nothing. The butler who answered the door said she was indisposed for gossiping, too busy about her duties, so I came away again. Tiresome walk for nothing. I could have been reading.’

‘Cloe-Claws let you leave without speaking to her?’ wondered Harriet, who had never dared resist the silver tabby’s demands.

Myrtle shrugged. ‘She was not best pleased with me. But what was I to do, force my way in?’

‘You *have* to speak with her,’ Rue said. ‘Tell anyone who gets in your way that it’s Godmothering business.’

‘I did not think of that,’ said Myrtle. ‘Did you know that Randalls has the most fascinating gate guardians? A pair of lions in the old style. I’ve never noticed them before.’

‘They’re to keep the witch out,’ said Harriet.

‘Witch?’ said Myrtle.

‘Mistress Woodhouse told me all about it when we walked to Randalls. You know about the witch and Mistress Woodhouse and her hair?’

‘Hair?’ Myrtle stared at Harriet as though she were talking nonsense.

‘Don’t you know about the witch and the hair?’ Harriet exclaimed. ‘Do you mean to say that I know something you don’t!’

‘I’m not interested in Mistress Woodhouse’s hair,’ said Myrtle, ‘but what’s this about a witch?’

‘The Wild Wood witch,’ said Harriet. ‘The Sorceress of the West. Or is it the East? She threatened to come back to Highbury and get her revenge. Master Woodhouse gave Mistress Weston the gate charms as a wedding gift.’

‘How interesting,’ said Myrtle. ‘I must research this witch.’

‘Never mind about some witch who ain’t been seen for years,’ said Rue, ‘we have to keep focused on our assignments.’

‘Hannah Hazeldene will likely be at the market tomorrow,’ Harriet said. ‘You can see her there.’

‘That’s what Cloe-Claws told me,’ said Myrtle. ‘And, yes. I’ll go.’

IN THE WAY OF LOVE

‘Oh, Mistress Woodhouse, sorry I’m so late! One of my girls was sick this morning, and another one had lost her shoe, and I had to help her find it, and I had to use ever such a lot of Dust to make finding spells, for I kept getting the spell a little off, but we found a good many other things – it was quite like having a treasure hunt!’ Harriet burst into the morning parlour, looking a little blowsy from the wind, and smelling of autumn.

‘Well, you’re here now,’ said Emma, beckoning her to come and take a seat. ‘I’ve been going over all I wrote after having tea with Master Elftyn yesterday. We should compare notes. Let me see what you wrote, Harriet.’

Harriet passed her notebook to her companion. Emma read aloud: ‘*Mr. E smells lyke hunney-suckel and sumthing else. Mr. E feels lyke—* feels like what, Harriet? You have not written anything of his energy.’

‘I did not know how to describe it in writing. It felt like a kind of *bouncy* energy, like a calf or lamb when they are bouncing around the field, you know?’ Harriet made a bouncing movement with her hand as she described this. ‘But it also felt like a kind of *watery* energy.’ She moved her hands through the air in a flowing motion, ‘as though it were slipping around things like a river does, or like a running brook. Oh, Mistress Woodhouse, I am not very good at this sensing work, I never was.’

Emma held her tongue from commenting that she was better at sensing than she was at spelling. She only said evenly, ‘I think your description very good, Harriet. I also felt that combination of an excitable, youthful energy, combined with a more fluid smoothness. I think your description excellent.’

‘You do?’ Harriet beamed.

Emma handed the book back. 'Write the words *bouncing* and *watery*, just as you said them. I shall write in my book *excitable*, *youthful* and *smooth*.'

'Does bouncing have one *s* or two?' Harriet murmured.

'Neither, dear. The *ess* sound is made with a *c*.'

There was a minute of silence as they wrote.

'Your notes said nothing of his words,' Emma said, when their pencils were still. 'We were to listen for the words between and beneath speech. Did you hear anything?'

'Oh dear, I cannot say that I did.'

'What about when I enquired of Master Elftyn if he were pleased with his decision to move to Highbury, do you recall his answer?'

'Well, let me think...'

'He said,' Emma prompted, 'that he was delighted that he had moved to Highbury because...?'

'Oh, because... because... now what did he say?'

'That he was delighted because he had found in Highbury...?'

'Oh yes! He made such a pretty compliment! He said that he had found in Highbury the most charming people in all the kingdom, there surely could be no ladies anywhere in the world as charming as he had met with here.'

'And who was he looking at as he said this?'

'He was talking in general, Mistress Woodhouse.'

'No, you are wrong, Harriet, most happily wrong, for Master Elftyn was looking at *you* as he said the latter words. I was watching him carefully, I assure you.'

'Really? Oh, I'm sure I never heard anyone say such pretty things before in my whole life. He is *very* charming, is he not?'

'Charming enough for a worthy young lady,' said Emma with a smile. 'But that was not all. Recall what he said when I mentioned Mistress Weston's recent marriage?'

Harriet looked blank.

'He made a comment regarding the state of matrimony, do you recall?'

Harriet scrunched up her lips in thought. 'I recall he said something very pretty about it, now what was it?'

'He said that he envied Master Weston excessively, did he not?'

‘Oh yes! And he was smiling, and then he laughed, so I was not certain that he meant it.’

‘Oh, be sure he meant it, Harriet. The smile and laughter were a ruse, do you see? The words were hidden beneath them, but he certainly meant them. And *envy* is a strong word, is it not?’

‘So it is. And he did not merely envy, but envied *excessively*.’

‘Harriet, you have discerned exactly right.’

‘Have I?’

‘So, let us see.’ Emma ran her finger down her list. ‘*Smell*, you wrote honeysuckle and something else, I wrote *hyacinth*, and then I put a question mark. I came to the same conclusion as you, Harriet. I could not identify the second scent. Never mind. We will try again when next we meet with him. Now, back to our list. We observed with our eyes. I observed a young man most eager to please, exerting his charm with intention. In short, I saw a would-be-lover.’

Harriet nodded and laughed and blushed all at the same time.

‘Sight, smell, speech, feeling, *taste*. We recorded nothing for taste. What taste did our conversation leave with us?’

‘Oh dear, I confess that I only recall the taste of those delightful little biscuits your cook made, the ones with chopped almonds on the top.’

‘I fared little better myself,’ Emma admitted. ‘I cannot recall what taste was left with me afterwards. Ah, well. I shall pay more attention to that tomorrow.’ She shut her book. ‘We’ve made a good start. And there is still so much to do. We still have our riddle and rhyme exercise to do this morning.’

‘And meditation,’ added Harriet. ‘Shall I get the book of proverbs?’

Emma winced slightly. She had opened the book earlier that morning while alone, and read the words: *The taste of honey is strongly sweet, but there may be a sting for the grasping of it*. The book made little sense to her. In fact, its words always left an unpleasant taste in her mouth. Like having one’s teeth cleaned with soap.

‘Perhaps later. Let’s do our other lessons and tasks first. We’ll work on our riddle for a half hour and then put on our cloaks and walk out and look round the market.’



MARKET DAY in Highbury was a cheerful affair. Usually.

Usually on market day in Highbury in October, Farmer Mitchell's stall, piled high with pumpkins, would be doing a brisk trade, as would Mistress Martin's, with her cheeses wrapped in leaves, and her jars of pickles and chutneys and jams.

Usually Mistress Wallis's bakery door was wide open to accommodate the steady flow of customers coming in to buy her famous Market Buns, which she only baked on Saturday mornings.

Usually there would be plenty of folk about the saddlery stall, and the chandler with his boxes of candles; the blacksmith would display the wonderfully delicate work he made in between the everyday buckets and horseshoes: candlesticks of blossoming trees, napkin rings of flower wreaths so delicate and dainty. By day the blacksmith took after his mortal father in the everyday smithing, but in the evenings his elven mother's blood was seen in his artistry.

And what market day in Highbury in October would be complete without a stall of Donwell Orchard apples and apple cider? Stone bottles, lined up neatly, wicker baskets of gleaming red and golden Donwell apples, well known to be the best baking apple, eating apple, pie-making apple in all the county, if not in all the kingdom. There were apples for sale, but few customers.

'What's wrong with the market?' said Rue as she surveyed the diminished square. 'How come the bakery's shut? Where's all the fae market holders? Where's that fairy lady with her fae wool? I wanted to knit mittens for Midwinter gifts. And where's them brownie sisters who make the best cakes in all the county?'

'Where's the pixie man who makes ink?' added Myrtle. 'He's always here. His ink lasts twice as long as any I can make.'

'Let's ask someone,' Rue said, moving to the nearest stall, which was a tiny table displaying neatly turned wooden bowls. 'Morning, sir, where is everyone today?'

The elderly wood-turner sat on a stool of his own making, whittling at a block of wood.

'Don't rightly know, maid,' said the wood-turner. 'Something's amiss. Fae folk don't wish to come abroad, for they feel the kilting in the wind. Last time it felt this much out of kilter was when Old Jack, who was Young Jack at the time, did venture across the border and steal a fae goose to breed

wi' his own. Fae folk don't take kindly to thievery, even if it be a goose. Everything went out of kilter 'til Young Jack made good. Cost him near all he had to repay seven-fold. Near ruined him. Very particular about their goods an' their magic is the fae. If 'ee ask me, someone's been pilfering magic. I wouldn't wish to be in their shoes when it comes out.'

He shook his head of wispy white hair.

Rue and Myrtle exchanged glances and moved away, but Rue suddenly looked very strange.

Harriet appeared, walking beside Mistress Woodhouse. She broke away from her companion to run over and greet them.

'Isn't this a dismal market?' Harriet said. 'What's wrong, Rue?' she said, catching sight of Rue's expression. 'You look ill. Oh, dear, you haven't caught Penny Abbott's stomach-ache, have you? I thought we'd treated it with the Dust and ginger.'

'I'm not ill,' said Rue, 'I'm never ill.' She tried to laugh, but her laugh came out rather shrill. 'I think I know why the fae folk are out of sorts, and it's all my fault.'

'What do you mean?'

'I, um, used Mother Goodword's wand. Only once. Or twice. Or so...'

'Rue!' exclaimed Harriet. 'You were only to use it for the Dust!'

Myrtle looked curious. 'What did you use it for? Did it obey you?'

'I only put a troublesome bee to sleep.'

'That's all?'

Rue shrugged. 'I helped Lizzie Martin's cow, oh, and I did try magicking the Dust twice over.'

'Why?' said Harriet.

'To see if it would be double strength.' She sighed. 'But it weren't.'

Myrtle nodded sympathetically. 'I've often wondered if that were possible.'

'Wouldn't it be fun?' said Rue, forgetting her remorse.

'Rue!' protested Harriet. 'You must put it back where it belongs.'

'Did you use it for anything else?' asked Myrtle. 'There seems to be a lot of fuss from the Fae over one bee and a cow.'

'Well,' said Rue slowly, her face screwing up into a wince. 'I might have turned that pesky chestnut sprite into a squirrel.'

'Did you change him back?' Harriet cried. 'Oh, poor, poor sprite! Rue, how could you?'

‘I did change him back. Well. Almost.’

‘Almost?’ Harriet looked distressed enough to cry.

‘Well... oh, you’ll see. I did warn him!’ she said in her own defence. ‘He would keep pelting me every time I walked by. Those conkers hurt, you know!’ But Rue was very fond of Harriet, and did not like seeing her upset. ‘I’ll put the wand back,’ she promised. ‘Right now.’

‘And be sure to lock the desk,’ said Harriet.

‘Right then,’ said Rue, patting her pocket where the wand and key was kept. ‘I’ll see you both later. I’ll run and put it in the desk.’

‘Go on then,’ Harriet said, as Rue hesitated.

Myrtle’s attention was distracted by the appearance of a young woman in a neat, plain gown and cloak hurrying through the marketplace. ‘There’s my ward,’ said Myrtle, watching Hannah Hazeldene as she threaded her way through the scanty crowd, her basket on her arm. ‘It must be her half day off, she’s not in uniform. I ought to speak to her. See you both later.’ And Myrtle strode away across the marketplace.

‘Oh, there’s Lizzie,’ said Rue, spying Elizabeth Martin making her way to her mother’s stall. ‘I must speak to her. Assignment business,’ she said as Harriet protested. ‘I’ll go straight back to school once I’ve spoken to Lizzie, I *promise*.’

‘Mother Goodword says a Godmother’s promise is as binding as a spell,’ Harriet reminded her. ‘Let me take it back. Every moment it’s not where it ought to be makes it stolen magic, Rue.’

‘Oh, all right,’ grumbled Rue, taking the wand and key out and handing them over. Her grip on the wand lingered a moment after Harriet had taken hold of it.

‘Rue!’ Harriet prompted, feeling the resistance. ‘It’s very bad to covet what’s not ours to have. You know what—’

‘Yes, I know what Mother Goodword says.’ Rue let go of the wand, then shook herself as though to shake free of it altogether. ‘I’m going to try out that smelling spell we looked up last night,’ she said. ‘I’ll see if I can winkle out of Lizzie who she likes, but don’t know she likes.’

‘Don’t use too much Dust. Remember what we read about smelling spells making one sneeze if they are too strong.’ But Rue had gone.

‘WHAT CAN I use to hold the spell?’ Rue murmured as she wended her way round the edge of the marketplace. A clump of tall, purple daisies had sprouted up beside the stone watering trough, and she plucked a stem, cupped the flower in both hands and concentrated very hard on making the spell.

‘Little daisy, carry well, upon your stem this little spell.

‘When true love passes, make a smell.’

She took a pinch of Dust from the pouch the Sisters each carried in their pockets and sprinkled the daisy. It glittered, and the sparkle sank into the flower, plumping up the petals and deepening the colour. Fairy Dust was such fun! Pity it did not last long, at least not when her spells were so weak. She must work harder on spell making; Mother Goodword’s poetic spells were beautiful and long lasting.

‘Morning, Mistress Martin, morning Lizzie!’ Rue greeted, elbowing her way to the front of Mistress Martin’s stall.

‘Morning, Sister Rue,’ replied Elizabeth, barely returning Rue’s smile.

‘What’s wrong?’ Rue asked.

‘It’s been a wearisome morning. I told you of the trouble with our cow, now the jam has been going badly.’ She gestured to the scanty supply of jars on display. ‘Nothing is going right this week. I think our brownie is right, something’s out of kilter.’

‘Ain’t the cow no better?’ Rue asked, puzzled, for she had cast a spell to ensure an abundance of milk.

‘It’s giving milk again,’ said Elizabeth, ‘bucketfuls, but it comes out blue.’

‘Blue?’

‘You didn’t do anything to her, did you?’ Elizabeth said, narrowing her eyes.

Rue ignored the question. ‘Come and take a turn about the marketplace,’ she said, beckoning her from her place behind the stall. ‘I want your opinion on something. Can I take Lizzie for a minute, Mistress Martin?’ Rue asked, taking hold of Elizabeth’s arm before Mistress Martin had replied.

‘Want my opinion on what?’ Elizabeth said, as she was tugged away, and the daisy was surreptitiously thrust into the band of her straw bonnet.

‘Oh, this and that,’ said Rue gaily, looking about for any suitable men to try out the smelling spell on. She spotted William Cox standing in the

doorway of his office and made a beeline for him. He would be an excellent young man to begin with. 'Let's bid Master Cox good morning,' she said, pulling Elizabeth along.

William Cox, Giles Arthbutnot, Luke Mitchell, Walter Sanders, Adam Wallis, Ernie Stokes, even Jemmy Gilbert, Rue brought Elizabeth Martin before them all, but to no avail – the smell of true love was decidedly absent.

'Are you getting a cold?' Elizabeth asked. They were lingering near to Ernie Stokes who sat upon an empty ale cask at the side of the Crown Inn, whistling tunelessly to himself.

'A cold?' said Rue, sniffing the air, 'not at all.'

'You keep sniffing.'

'Do I?' Rue sniffed harder, but all she could smell was stale ale.

'I must get back to Mama,' said Elizabeth. 'She'll want to pack up soon. It's been a poor morning's work. What was it you wanted to show me?'

'Morning, ladies!' bellowed Ernie Stokes from his perch. 'Looking fine and handsome, if I might say so!'

'Ugh,' said Elizabeth with a grimace. 'So uncouth.'

'Let's go then,' said Rue despondently. Had the spell failed because she was so poor at casting them, or because Eliza's true love was not to be found in the market place that morning, even though everyone came there on a Saturday morning?

They returned to the Martins' stall; Robert Martin was stood by, listening to his mother's account of the poor sales they'd had.

'Oh, look, it's Harriet,' cried Elizabeth, waving at the plump and pretty little figure walking on the other side of the square.

Harriet saw her and waved back. She came towards them, blushing and dimpling as she came. She had almost reached them when a tall figure in a scarlet cloak appeared, calling Harriet's name. Harriet paused, and for a moment looked stricken, then turned to join with Mistress Woodhouse. They walked away, Harriet giving a glance over her shoulder as she went.

'Well,' said Elizabeth in a clipped tone. 'I see it is true regarding Harriet being taken up by the Lady of the Manor. I suppose we aren't good enough now that she moves in more exalted circles.'

'Don't speak of her like that,' said her brother, watching the retreating figure of Harriet. 'She'd have come and spoken with us if she could. One could see she wished to.'

Rue was moving about, sniffing the air like a bloodhound.

‘Sister Rue, what are you doing?’ Elizabeth said.

‘I’m *sniff* following *sniff* my nose...’ She wandered in a circle, trying to trace the distinctive smell she had caught, she had truly caught it – the smell of a true love. There was no mistaking it. It was just as Mother Goodword had said it would be – a smell of roses in midsummer, while the midday sun was still upon them, mixed with a hint of something sharp and clean, like lemon. She *had* smelled it, but where did it come from, and where had it gone?

She looked around. A letter-boy had ridden by on a donkey, but he was far too young; a dapper young man in a plum-coloured coat with large, shiny buttons was walking away, she couldn’t recall his name, but she had seen him with the Coles, he must be a friend of theirs, could it be him? She moved towards him, sniffing the air, but she was moving too far away from the daisy in Elizabeth’s hat. The spell would not stretch so far.

‘Do you know that fellow?’ she asked Elizabeth, turning back to her.

‘What fellow?’

‘The one in the smart frock coat.’

‘The dandy, dressed in purple?’

Rue sighed, feeling weary of the whole business of matchmaking. It was not going well.

‘What’s that in your bonnet, child?’ Mistress Martin said, catching sight of the daisy in the brim of Elizabeth’s hat.

Robert Martin plucked it out. ‘Who’s dandifying themselves this morning?’ he teased. He sniffed and bent his head down to the flower. ‘Smells like roses,’ he murmured.

‘You can smell roses?’ Rue demanded, staring at him. ‘That must mean...’ she did not finish her sentence; she was too confused. Elizabeth Martin had smelt nothing, but her brother could – so what was going on? He was not her ward, so why did he smell true love? And more importantly, *who* was close by that he could smell it?

She whirled around, looking at everyone within reach. An old woman with a basket was at the next stall, examining marrows; Anne and Kitty Cox were approaching, their heads bent together, giggling and whispering. Harriet and Mistress Woodhouse were completing the circle of stalls and were coming by again. Harriet smiled a greeting at the Cox sisters, but

Mistress Woodhouse kept her arm linked in hers, so she could not stop and chat.

The smell grew stronger. Robert Martin looked almost drunk on it, and he took a few steps away. Even prosaic Mistress Martin was sniffing the air a little behind him.

‘Morning, Master Martin,’ said the Cox sisters in unison. Kitty Cox giggled.

Master Martin looked a little dazed, and his eyes were glassy as he looked down at the upturned faces of the sisters.

Rue was watching all of this carefully and wondering to herself. This was not part of the plan. Had Mother Goodword given her the right ward? Should it have been Master Martin, not Maid Martin? And clearly his match was with one of the Cox sisters, there was no doubt of that – the smell was positively heady.

This was not going to plan. Not at all.

A BLACK MORNING'S WORK

Myrtle followed Hannah Hazeldene through the marketplace. She was a fast walker, and even with Myrtle's long stride she had a job catching her up. Down the Broadway Hannah hurried, past the bakery and Crown Inn, leaving the market crowd behind; past the Coles' large dwelling, and down the leafy lane that led to the grounds of Hartfield. So that was where she was headed. Then Myrtle recalled that Hannah's father was the coachman at Hartfield.

Myrtle picked up her pace. If she wanted to speak to Hannah, she needed to catch her before she reached the stables. But she did not yet know *what* she would ask Hannah. What was it Mother Goodword had said? – That they must listen closely to the silent words between and beneath those spoken aloud; silent words were a clue to the heart. Myrtle was not at all sure of what that meant, and she didn't find it easy to make idle conversation. Perhaps she should have brought Rue; she could chatter to anyone about anything.

'I need a spell,' Myrtle said to herself. 'What can I use to carry it?' A fallen twig on the ground caught her eye. That would do. She took a pinch of Dust from her pouch and closed her eyes to concentrate.

*'Fallen twig, from above,
'Carry words, that tell of love,
'Words between, and words below,
'Bring to my ear that I might know.'*

She sprinkled the twig with Dust. It glowed as though blue fire was passing over it, like a plum pudding being lit at Yuletide. When the glow

had subsided, she snapped the twig in two and tucked them behind her ears. Now she was ready to listen.

‘Maid Hazeldene!’ Myrtle called, raising the hem of her gown to run.

‘Yes?’ Hannah said, giving a curious look back. ‘Can I help you? You’re one of Mother Goodword’s schoolteachers, are you not?’

‘I am,’ said Myrtle, panting a little. ‘May I walk with you a little way?’

‘You are going to Hartfield, Sister... is it Mistletoe, no, Mallow?’

‘Myrtle.’

‘Sorry. I’m not good with names. I’ve been at my new position for three weeks now, and I still haven’t remembered everyone’s name. Who are you going to see at Hartfield?’

‘I dare say you are visiting your father,’ said Myrtle, avoiding the question.

‘I am. I knitted Pa a new scarf. The weather’s turning cold, and he feels the chill when he drives out, ‘specially at night.’ She lifted the cloth cover on her basket to show a lumpy woollen scarf. ‘I’m not much good at knitting. It’s a bit uneven, but Pa won’t mind. I ought to ask old Dame Baytes to knit for me, she’s the best knitter in Highbury, her rows are so neat, I don’t know how she does it. I’m a tolerably good sewer, but only at plain work.’

Myrtle’s eyes were glazing over a little through this conversation. She had been made to take up knitting as a student and had snapped the wooden needles in frustration, which resulted in a week’s cleaning duties.

‘How do you like your new position?’ Myrtle asked, scrabbling around for a topic of conversation. ‘Master Weston is known to be a convivial man, and Mistress Weston a very amiable woman.’

‘Oh, they’re very good people,’ Hannah said. ‘I ought to be very happy.’

The twigs behind Myrtle’s ears tingled against her skin.

‘Ought?’

‘Did I say ought? I meant I *am* very happy. Very grateful. Yes. I am very grateful for my excellent new position... the Westons are good employers... so very kind.’

The tiny pauses caused further tingling.

‘Where did you work before?’

‘At Donwell. As a lower maid. I’m a general maid now. The work is much easier.’

‘You were not happy at Donwell?’

‘Oh, I *was* very happy at Donwell. The work was hard. Old houses get so dusty and cobwebby and need so much cleaning, Randalls is not nearly so old. It’s got polished wainscoting and new curtains. So much easier to keep clean and nice. No old tapestries taller than me to beat. No enormous stone floors to mop.’

Myrtle heard the discrepancy in Hannah’s words. The twigs were tingling away. The work was so much easier, the position higher, and yet underneath her words was a yearning for her old position.

‘It must be nice to have an improved wage, as well as easier work,’ she probed. Perhaps the pay was not so good, and that was the cause for discontent.

‘Yes. The wages are improved,’ said Hannah flatly.

‘And I am sure your colleagues are friendly? The Westons would not keep staff that were not pleasant, I’m sure.’

‘Yes. Everyone is very nice. Most kind. I am very fortunate.’ The words were still flat.

‘But no doubt there are those you miss from Donwell?’ pressed Myrtle. ‘You must miss people there. Perhaps one person in particular?’ She stole a sideways glance at Hannah and saw a blush deepen her already rosy cheeks.

‘Yes. I do miss... friends.’

The twigs tingled.

Aha! Thought Myrtle triumphantly. She has left behind her true love at Donwell!

‘Do you go and visit your friend at Donwell? The one you miss most?’

Hannah looked startled, as though Myrtle had jolted her out of a memory that had absorbed her for a moment. ‘Oh, no. It would not be... it is not... that is to say... oh, no. I must forget... I must.’

The twigs were tingling and whispering the missing words from Hannah’s speech: It would not be *seemly*, they whispered, it is not *possible*, that is to say *it is all a dream*, oh, no. I must forget *him*, I must.

Myrtle was silent as she pondered how she would find out who *he* was, the man Hannah must forget. But they had reached the gate the servants used to access the stables at the side of Hartfield Manor. Hannah pushed open the gate.

‘Are you coming in, or going on to the house? Who was it you said you were going to visit?’

‘I’m going this way,’ said Myrtle, stepping back from the gate. There would be no use following Maid Hazeldene any farther. ‘Goodbye.’

‘It was pleasant to talk to you,’ Hannah said, though the tingling behind Myrtle’s ears told her it had not been pleasant, it had been a source of pain. ‘By the way, Sister Marigold, you have a twig in your hair, just above the ear. In fact, you have one on the other side as well.’

Myrtle lifted the hood of her forgetfulness cloak in parting and saw Hannah blink hard and give her head a little shake as she forgot that she had been speaking to an odd, tall young lady who asked lots of questions.

Hannah turned around and took hold of the gate latch, Myrtle strode away down the lane, lowering the hood of her cloak. She had done her afternoon’s work on her assignment; she deserved some uninterrupted reading time in the library. The book she was reading on the fae-life of Faerie marshlands was fascinating. Beggars, Will-o-wisps, Jack-o’-lanterns, Marsh-hags, and then there were the poisonous swamp toads – poisonous enough to kill a grown man!

MYRTLE LOST no time in going to Donwell the following Monday, leaving early, before her morning class began. If Hannah Hazeldene’s match was of the servant class, then he would be up at dawn, and Myrtle would see him about his work.

She paused outside the entrance to the manor house in order to make a rhyme. She was running a little low on Dust, she should have filled her pouch up properly. She would have to get some more from the jar Rue had made up.

Thinking up romantic rhymes for spells was not Myrtle’s strong point, but she needed one that morning. She looked about for something to hold the charge. ‘You will do,’ she said to an obliging beech tree.

She gathered a pair of beech nuts from the ground, taking them out of their bristly cases. She gauged that two were as much as would hold a pinch of Dust; she would spread the magic too thinly with any more. Holding the nuts in the palm of her left hand, and taking the Dust between the fingers of her right hand, she closed her eyes and concentrated, searching for the words.

*‘Little beech, good and sweet,
Bear this charge in your meat,*

*'Whosoever's mouth does eat,
'True love's name, he must speak.'*

It was not a perfect rhyme, but Mother Goodword always said the rhyme would work as long as three out of four lines rhymed; a fourth could be a half rhyme, as long as there was clarity in the direction and unity in the theme. She sprinkled the Dust and the beech nuts glowed as though made of polished carnelian. The Dust sank in, and Myrtle pulled up the hood of her forgetfulness cloak and hurried on before the magic began to fade.

She passed the stables first, where a young groom was sweeping the yard. 'Too young,' Myrtle murmured; he could not be above fourteen years. A second man sat on a hay bale polishing tack. 'Too old,' she said. He looked up as she passed by. He would only recall seeing a shadow passing, dimming the light momentarily.

A horse with his head over his stable door snickered at her as she passed by, and tried to take the beech nuts out of her hand. 'Oh, no you don't,' she scolded, stepping out of reach. The cloak did not shield her from the vision of animals or fae.

There was no one else in the stables, so she entered the servants' quarters, slipping through the door as the scullery maid opened it to throw a pail of dirty water into the courtyard.

'What a maze!' Myrtle said as she hurried through rooms and anterooms and corridors and peeped into door after door, looking for any male servant who had a lovelorn smell about him. She had checked the *Dictionary of Smells* in preparation the night before; everybody knew that love smelled something like roses, with variations in strength and type, but she had read that deferred love was more like the sharp tang of nettles. She was not entirely sure what the smell of nettles was like, but she trusted she would know it when she smelled it.

She passed the butler – *too old*, the under-butler – *smells only of mustard* – *must look up what mustard means* – four footmen – *not a whiff of anything nettle-ish, one of them smells of beer*. This was proving to be more difficult than she thought. A gnomess bustled into the pantry where Myrtle had found herself. Donwell certainly had well-stocked shelves. *Apple pies, a whole shelf of strawberry preserve – what kind of mead is that, I wonder?*

'Leave off the master's spruce beer!' growled the gnomess. Myrtle jumped away from the rows of stone bottles. 'Bad enough that yon wastrel

in breeches keeps pilfering it.' She jerked her head towards the room beyond, where Myrtle had passed the footmen busy cleaning silver.

'I wasn't touching anything,' Myrtle replied, removing her hood, which was ineffective in the presence of fae folk.

'Who are you, and what are you doing creeping round the pantry?' The gnomess looked fierce. Myrtle examined her with interest, noting the thickset neck and shoulders which gave the gnomes such strength, despite the shortness of their arms.

'What are you gaping at?' the gnomess snapped.

'Do you find it hard working in a house?' Myrtle asked. 'Do you not miss working with the earth?'

The gnomess looked surprised by the question, but her scowl returned. 'Mind your own business. Get out of here before I call the butler to have you thrown out.'

'The butler cannot see me,' said Myrtle with satisfaction, pulling up her hood. 'And I am here on Godmothering business.'

The gnomess sniffed and began pulling items from the pantry shelves and putting them onto a large tray.

'And, as a fae, you are bound by honour to assist me,' Myrtle reminded her, 'when I am on a lawful assignment.'

The gnomess sniffed again and continued stacking her tray.

'Could you tell me if there are any unmarried men in the house who have the smell of nettles about them.'

'Nettles?'

'Yes. Nettles. Or something like it. It is the smell of deferred love.'

The gnomess's sniff became a snort.

'I know gnomes do not hold with notions of love, and I am quite in sympathy, but I need to find someone here who is in love with a young girl in the village. It's Godmothering business,' she reiterated.

'There's more than one,' the gnomess admitted.

'Who?'

'The boot boy. The bailiff's son. The master.'

'The master?' But of course. The master of Donwell was Harriet's ward. That was not so much of a surprise. 'The boot boy and the bailiff's son,' repeated Myrtle. 'Where would I find the bailiff's son?'

'*Not* in the pantry!' growled the gnomess. 'Now out. I've said all I know.'

Myrtle found the boot boy; he looked to be about the same age as Hannah Hazeldene. He was bickering with the shoemaker elf over the thickness of the soles on a pair of boots. 'I tell you it ain't thick enough!' the boot boy said. 'Master'll wear it through in no time and give me no end of grief for not getting 'em heeled as he wants.'

'*That*,' said the shoemaker elf, pointing at the sole of the boot, 'is the hide of a Midnight Boar, tougher than any old boots, and worth a year of your wages! The master *ain't* going to wear it out any time soon.'

'A Midnight Boar,' exclaimed Myrtle, feeling a surge of interest. She moved forward to better see. The boot boy cried out at the invisible voice behind him and dropped the boot. The elf could see Myrtle well enough. She pushed back her hood for the boot boy's sake and picked up the boot, examining the sole. 'Beautiful,' she murmured, running her finger over the thin, brown-patterned hide.

'Glad someone appreciates my work!' said the elf, glaring at the boot boy as he slapped a receipt on the table. 'There's my bill, and it *ain't* cheap!' he said, mimicking him before he left.

'Pesky elf,' muttered the boot boy. 'Right rude he is. Who are you? Why are you sniffing me?'

Myrtle had been sniffing the air around the youth, but it was hard to discern nettles from the thick smell of shoe polish in the room.

'Eat this,' she said, taking one of the Dust-covered beech nuts from her pocket.

'What? Why?'

'Just do it,' Myrtle urged. 'It's Godmothering business.'

'I don't want no Godmother.'

'Master's orders,' fibbed Myrtle. The boot boy scowled, but he ate the nut, which was glowing irresistibly. 'Tell me,' said Myrtle, when he'd crunched and swallowed it, 'who do you love?'

He blinked, the effect of the nut prompting him to speak whether or not he wished to. 'Me Gran. Me Ma. Darkie.'

'Darkie? Who's that?' Perhaps it was a nickname for Hannah, who did have dark hair. 'Is there any young lady you love?'

He shook his head.

'But you smell nettle-y. I think.' It was difficult to tell with the smell of raw tallow so strong in the room. But the gnomess had said the boot boy

smelled of nettles. 'Is there someone you love whom you're separated from? Someone you are missing? Someone you long to see?'

He nodded and looked miserable. 'Me dog, Darkie. She died. Was old. Never have a dog so good as her again.'

Myrtle pulled her hood up, vexed that she had wasted time. The boy blinked as all memory of their conversation faded from his mind. Myrtle stalked out to find the bailiff's son, who likely lived in the bailiff's cottage farther out on the estate. He was her last hope of finding any clue that morning. The effect of the Dust would only last about half an hour more, and she had a class to teach at nine o'clock. She had to move fast. Oh, for the wings of a senior Fairy Godmother. Would she ever have them?

FINDING the bailiff's son involved a trek across dew-soaked grass, a misstep into a patch of boggy ground, several ankle-deep muddy puddles, and a snarling guard dog that took a precious pinch of Dust and a hurried Calming Rhyme to appease. The heavens opened and poured down a brief, but heavy shower, and the maid at the bailiff's cottage was very rude in telling her that the bailiff's son was not at home, and Myrtle walked much farther than she needed to in searching for him before she eventually found him drawing water from a well house.

Myrtle watched him at work, feeling partly relieved at having found him, and partly miserable at standing with soaked, cold feet.

'It must be him,' she said to herself. He was the right age, he was well looking, if one liked a tall, brawny young man with a head of brown curls. His countenance was cheerful, he was whistling as he worked. *Cheerful*, thought Myrtle. He was supposed to be lovelorn. She groaned inwardly, hoping this was not a wild goose chase she was on. But then she caught the tune he was whistling, and recalled the words of the song it belonged to: *My love she has gone o'er the shiny, briny sea. Will e'er she return, an' come home to marry me?* This was more encouraging. She put down her hood and approached the well.

'Morning, sir!'

'Good morning!' he returned, after a moment of surprise at her sudden appearance. 'Care you for a drink?' He lifted the dipping spoon.

'I thank you for the offer,' said Myrtle, coming closer so she could smell the air about him, but there was a breeze rising, and it was carrying his

scent away from her. 'But it is I who have something to give you.' She held out the beech nut, which still glowed like amber. 'Eat it, if you will.'

The young man laughed. 'No fear!' he cried cheerfully. 'I know all about these sorts of tricks. I'll not eat something out of Faerie.'

'It is not out of Faerie,' snapped Myrtle, feeling irritated by the frustrations of her morning's work. She hated having wet stockings. Why couldn't people just do as they were bid? 'It's Godmothering business. Now eat.'

The Dust soaked nut should have been irresistible to the one ordered to eat it; the effect of the magic ensured that. Yet the young man still resisted.

'I'll not eat any charm,' he said, shaking his curly head. 'No doubt it's some love potion to catch me. I've heard of such things. And I especially won't eat nuts.'

'I do not employ love potions. If you must know it's to learn the name of your true love, and nothing more, now *eat*.'

If she had found him half an hour earlier, the magic would have been strong enough for him to be unable to resist, but the power of the Dust was fading. She argued in her mind whether to use up more Dust; but she didn't want to waste any. She would need a spell to dry her feet for the walk home, and drying spells always took far more Dust than wet ones. She tried a different tack.

'If you please, sir,' she said, adjusting her voice to a polite tone. 'I am on Godmothering business, and I need you to eat this nut and tell me the name of your true love, nothing more. Or, at least tell me directly, without eating the nut, the name of the young lady you are pining for.'

'Pining?' he said with a laugh. 'I've never pined in my life! What am I, a lovesick swain?'

'There is no young lady you are fond of?'

'Well... perhaps there is.'

'I am relieved to hear it. Tell me her name.'

'Not likely.'

'Pardon?'

'You'll use it in some spell to snare me, and I tell you I cannot eat that nut.'

Myrtle groaned with vexation. 'What do you think I am, some kind of witch?'

The young man looked her up and down, with her rain-soaked, black hair, come loose from the knitting needle she used to keep it up, and falling in bedraggled strands about her scowling face. ‘You don’t look like a Fairy Godmother, that’s for sure. They always look quite pleasant.’

‘Master’s orders!’ said Myrtle, holding out the nut, ‘you must comply with Godmothering business!’

‘Master’s orders, hey?’ He eyed the nut. ‘No such orders have been told me.’

‘You know full well the master works with Mother Goodword.’

‘You’re not Mother Goodword. You’re only pretending to be her! Hah! Caught you out!’

‘If I had a wand,’ she said through gritted teeth, ‘I would turn you into a frog and leave you sitting in that well for a year and a day!’

‘I knew you were a witch!’ he cried triumphantly. ‘That’s just what an evil old crone would say! I’ll wager my hat you’re a crone disguised as a maid!’

‘That is it!’ growled Myrtle, reaching for another pinch of Dust.

‘Little beech nut, brown and sweet,

‘Irresistible to take and eat,

‘Cause the eater to be tame,

‘And reveal his true love’s name.

‘Now, EAT.’

‘Do not make me—’ he begged, but he could not resist the glowing nut, the magic compelled him. ‘Please—’ he begged one last time as he took it and lifted it to his mouth. ‘Allergic—’ he popped it into his mouth, his eyes still pleading with her.

‘Allergic?’ repeated Myrtle. ‘You do not mean...?’

She watched in horror as his face turned purple, and his cheeks swelled up like a squirrel stuffed full of acorns.

‘Ugh—aah—ohh,’ he moaned, clutching his throat as though he was having trouble breathing.

‘Merciful Mushrooms!’ cried Myrtle. He had dropped to his knees, still clutching his throat, still gargling and gasping in that dreadful way. She flew to his side, her fingers wrenching her pouch of Dust out that she might shake it over his head – she shook it all out, terrified that she might have killed him!

‘Dust be kind,

'Dust be a friend

'Make this man

'Heal and mend!'

It was a rushed rhyme, but amazingly it worked! The young man's cheeks began to deflate, his eyes ceased bulging, his colour faded from beetroot to a more regular hue, and he ceased gasping. Myrtle sat back on her mud-soaked heels and gave a long exclamation of relief.

'Why did you not say you were allergic to nuts, you great numskull!' Then she remembered her mission. 'Quick, before the magic wears off, who is your true love?'

He looked at her. '*Uth—ath—eth—*' he garbled, showing a swollen tongue, which had not yet returned to normal.

'Is her name Hannah?' Myrtle asked, feeling desperate as she saw the glow of the magic fading fast. 'Nod your head if her name is Hannah.'

The last of the glow departed, and the man's face had partly recovered.

'I wuth noth tell you nothin', you ole with!' he said through swollen lips.

Myrtle gave up. It was a dreadful morning's work, and she could bear no more. She put up her hood, glad that he would soon forget all about her, and left in her squelching boots, feeling a sneeze brewing as she shivered beneath her damp cloak.

THE BEGINNING OF WRETCHEDNESS

Harriet was troubled more than usual that morning as she taught her class.

Mistress Woodhouse's kind attempts at matchmaking her were adding to her confusion over who she was and what she was meant to do.

Was she to be a Godmother? If so, why had the Godmothering Council not given her a name? Was she to give up Godmothering, marry and lead an ordinary life? If so, why did she feel so sad at the thought of leaving her home at the school? And who would want to marry her? She suspected Master Elftyn was the man Mistress Woodhouse had in mind for her, but she could not quite believe it. Such a man as *him*. The whole notion of her marrying was such a strange one that she could not even speak of it to anyone, save Mistress Woodhouse.

She was perplexed. And there was no Mother Goodword to talk out her worries with. And Mother Goodword might only be disappointed that she was failing in her assignment. She wanted to do well and make Mother Goodword proud, but she simply could not discern who Master Knightley's match was.

Reading to her class from *The True and Trusty Tales of Sir Trowlyn* only increased her troubled thoughts, for Sir Trowlyn had led a very complicated love life.

Her students sat wide-eyed as she read aloud of how Sir Trowlyn had fallen in love with Eleonora the Ever-Fair, only to drink the fateful love potion given him by Genevieve the Dark, which made him fall hopelessly in love with *her*. Then he had been accosted by the powerful sorceress, Elementa le Fey, who had decided *she* rather liked him, and kept him in her

castle, feeding him Faerie food and wine and under an enchantment so he would be besotted with *her*.

But, of course, true love is far stronger than any enchanted love – which was the important lesson of the story for her students – so when the Royal Fairy Godmother, Lady Sweetbrier – the class always cheered when she appeared in a story – came and counselled Sir Trowlyn not to eat or drink the sorceress’s food and wine, but only morning dew and berries, then the enchantment weakened and Sir Trowlyn was able to make his escape and return home (with a half-dozen or so adventuresome diversions on the way) to his true love, the long-suffering Eleonora the Ever-Fair.

Of course, that was not quite the end of the story, for Eleonora had been duped by Duke Ethelbard the Eloquent into believing that Sir Trowlyn had abandoned her for another. It was the very eve of Eleonora’s wedding to the duke, a match she did not care for, but was forced into by her father, who wished to appease the duke, for he was the most powerful man in the kingdom, and could be a threat...

‘How complicated the path of true love is!’ exclaimed Harriet, ceasing her reading to express her troubled thoughts aloud. Her students stared at her. ‘Why must it be so *hard*?’

Martha Wood put her hand up. ‘Because people are always letting themselves get tricked?’ she offered.

‘Because it’s more fun to keep falling in love over and over?’ offered Franny Rabbit. ‘If they only fell in love once and never again, the stories would be over too quick.’

Lydia Lovelace agreed with this. ‘And true love has to be hard,’ she said. ‘All the important things are, like long division, and doing your own plaits.’

Harriet considered these points. ‘But why?’ she pondered aloud. ‘Is there some force that comes against true love? Some antagonistic spirit?’

Olive Johnson put her small hand up. ‘What’s an ‘tagnist?’

‘An antagonist is an enemy,’ said Martha Wood pertly.

The cuckoo called twelve times from the hall, and Harriet dismissed her students, who filed out of the classroom to giggle and chatter down the hall.

Harriet moved from her own chair to Franny Rabbit’s in the front row that she might clearly see the chalkboard on the wall. Chalk lay in its little holder, waiting for a command.

On the board was an illustration of Sir Trowlyn, in full armour, his hand upon his sword ready to challenge Duke Ethelbard. Eleonora the Ever-Fair looked ready to swoon at the sight of her true love returned, while her crowd of bridesmaids stood round her, too interested in the unfolding drama before them to think of catching their fainting mistress.

‘Why is true love so hard to find? I don’t suppose you could draw me a picture of Master Knightley’s true love, Chalk?’

Chalk lifted a few inches and quivered, then dropped back down.

‘Of course you can’t,’ said Harriet. ‘You can only draw illustrations for school lessons. You are not all-knowing.’

Chalk quivered again, as though trying its strength. Harriet’s hand went to the pouch of Dust in her pocket, but it was empty. There was something else in her pocket, however; her fingers touched a cool bronze key.

An impulse seized her. She jumped up, ran from the room, down the hall, into Mother Goodword’s empty parlour. She stood before the desk near the window staring at it with a strange look on her face as she wrestled with what she wanted to do and what she knew she ought not to do. A grim determination seized her, as it had never done before. ‘I must help myself,’ she said in a shaking voice. ‘Mother Goodword is not here to help me, and I must not fail. I *cannot*.’ And she pulled out the key to the desk she had been entrusted with and unlocked the drawer, snatching up the wand and hurrying from the classroom. Cloe-Claws came padding behind her, making a rumbling growl, so she made a sudden sprint, down the hall, into the classroom, slamming the door behind her.

She hesitated, the wand raised over the stick of Chalk, took a deep breath, and said quickly:

*‘Magic Chalk, rise and scratch,
‘out a portrait
‘of the match
‘of the man
‘tall and sprightly
‘known to us as Master Knightley!’*

One quick tap with the wand and Chalk rose up, glimmering and sparkling, flew to the board and sketched out lines and swirls faster than it had ever drawn before. ‘Oh my!’ Harriet cried out as the form of a lady took shape. ‘Oh, who is it, who is it?’

The face was not yet distinct. The lady's gown was very fashionable; the figure was a tad stout. Chalk flew over the face, and when the cloud of dust settled in a sparkle of stars, a lady was clearly portrayed. Harriet stared at her. Then she frowned. Then she cried out, 'Oh, Chalk! That is Master *John* Knightley's true love! That is his wife! I must know his brother's match – draw me Master *George* Knightley's true love!'

The drawing on the board vanished, and Chalk quivered and rose up again; but the magic was fading. The sparkle was lessened. The light was wilting. Chalk sketched out a picture, each line growing slower, returning to its usual pace. A faint figure of a woman appeared, but the face was blank of features. Harriet reached out to tap it again with the wand, but Chalk hovered in the air, made a strange hissing noise, and then there was a loud *pop*, as it exploded into a cloud of dust.

Harriet sank back onto the stool, staring in dismay at the white powder all over the floor that had been Chalk.

She would have to leave Highbury in failure. That would be the end of her story. She just knew it. She was not fit to be a Godmother. She was not fit to be a teacher. She would have to marry anyone who would have her, and leave everyone she loved here at the school, or be sent back to where she had come from – the hamlet of Digweed-on-the-Marsh.

She would become a marsh-maid, like all the other girls in the hamlet, spending her days ankle deep in mud, hunting for the horrible little eel-like creatures, putting the slimy things into the basket on her back until it was full, so she could sell them to the eel-monger in the town for a pittance. She had nowhere else to go. No family who would own her. Her thoughts circled round and round and she burst into tears.

Rue found her in this state when she opened the classroom door, coming to see why she had not come for lunch.

'Harriet, what's wrong?' she cried, coming in and taking the stool beside her.

'I...I...' blubbered Harriet, 'I... do not... want... to be... an eel catcher!'

'You're not an eel catcher, Harriet, you're a Godmother.'

Harriet shook her head.

'Yes, you are. We all are. We'll finish our assignments, and then we'll graduate.'

Harriet shook her fair head and hunted for a handkerchief to blow her nose.

‘I shall never graduate,’ she mumbled between sniffs. ‘I have no idea who my ward’s true love is. I’ve made a list and thought of everyone, but there is no one. It’s hopeless.’

‘Tripe and Tatties on Toast!’ cried Rue in defiance. ‘There’s no such thing as hopeless, I won’t have it. It’s early days.’

‘It’s been weeks,’ sniffed Harriet. ‘And I’m no closer to discerning who Master Knightley’s match is than when I began.’

‘No more am I,’ said Rue, ‘nor is Myrtle. We’re all in this together. We’re all finding our way. The first match is bound to be hard. Everything’s harder first time.’

‘But time is running out,’ moaned Harriet. ‘And then what will we do?’

‘Is that Mother Goodword’s wand?’ Rue caught sight of it under Harriet’s chair where she had dropped it in her despair. Rue bent down and picked it up. It felt warm, as though it had been just used, but law-abiding Harriet would never have taken it and used it, would she? ‘Did you...?’ she asked.

Harriet nodded and pulled out the key to Mother Goodword’s desk. ‘Lock it away, Rue, please, I’m not fit to be trusted with it.’

‘We will all be just fine,’ Rue said, patting Harriet’s shoulder. She slipped the wand and key into her large pocket. ‘We’ll get through this together. Cheer up. Busie has made muffins. Afterwards we’ll work together on our assignments – two heads is better than one. We’ll talk Myrtle out of her books and get her to help – three heads is better than two! By the way,’ she said as they turned to the door. ‘What’s all that white stuff on the floor?’

‘Oh, don’t ask,’ moaned Harriet.

AN AMAZING MATCH

Harriet stood at the turnstile of the footpath to Donwell. The talk with Rue and Myrtle the evening before had given her some courage, at least while they talked – courage that she could speak again with Master Knightley, and find some clue as to his match.

She was heartily ashamed of using the wand, she would *never* do such a thing again – what had she been thinking of! Her troubled conscience made her feel that she must double her efforts and work extra hard at her assignment.

She had spoken once to Master Knightley on the subject of love and marriage, but had not learnt much other than he liked musical young ladies. Next she would try identifying his scent when he thought of marriage, that would give her some clue. Discerning smell was her best sense. Mother Goodword said that matches always had complementary scents, it was one of the foundational laws of attraction. Looks and words could be oppositional in their attraction, but scent must always mingle in harmony. Nobody could live with a smell they did not like.

So why did she feel so anxious again? Mistress Woodhouse had no anxiety over her matchmaking; she was full of confidence. ‘I wish I could take Mistress Woodhouse’s confidence, and share a tenth part of it,’ she said to no one in particular, though she knew there was a lilac sylph in the lilac tree by the stile. ‘A hundredth part. A thousandth part, even. Why cannot I just *go*? Why am I so afraid?’

‘*Where do you go? What do you fear?*’ the lilac sylph said, moving out of the lilac trunk and showing herself as a little lady with streaming, lilac-coloured hair that wrapped around her like a cloak.

Harriet generally allowed herself to be charmed by tree sylphs, she thought them very pretty, despite their capricious ways. The sylph, sensing Harriet's admiration, danced about her, causing a gentle waft of air, scented with lilac, to wind about Harriet's head.

'Oh, you do smell beautiful,' said Harriet, breathing deeply, despite knowing full well that too much sylph-scent can dull a mortal's senses and make them suggestible to the charm of fairies. But Harriet was not thinking of that at that moment; she was only glad of some diversion from the task ahead.

'Where do you go, what do you fear?' the sylph sang again.

'I go to try and find my ward's true love,' Harriet replied, the heady scent of lilac lifting the anxiety from her, and making her feel that true love was a delightful thing, and how could she possibly be afraid? 'I go to find a man who wishes to marry, even if he does not know it yet.'

'I will bring you a man who wishes to marry,' the sylph said, still wrapping Harriet about in lilac fragrance. The sylph giggled and darted away. Harriet watched her as she streaked down the path and disappeared around the corner.

The smell of lilac now dissipated in the breeze, enough for Harriet to shake her head and recall why she was stood at the stile to the Donwell footpath. She was lifting her skirts to step onto the stile when the sound of footsteps crunching on fallen leaves in the lane made her look round. Walking towards her, though oblivious to her presence, was Master Elftyn with the lilac sylph flitting about his head.

'Away with you!' he scolded the sylph. 'Your tricks will not work on me, you little piskie!' The sylph darted at Harriet and enveloped her in scent once again.

Master Elftyn noticed Harriet for the first time, and gave a small nod of greeting, and would have passed on, but the sylph was making a figure of eight about Harriet and Master Elftyn, as though to tug them together.

'I said, away with you!' said Master Elftyn again, 'or I'll send for the woodcutter and have your tree chopped down!'

The sylph made a noise that sounded both indignant and rude, and disappeared into her tree.

'My apologies, Maid Smith,' said Master Elftyn, recalling some manners. 'But the fae seem particularly troublesome of late, I do not know what has got into them. One would think it was Midsummer Eve.'

Harriet was pleased that Master Elftyn should remember her name, for she had not spoken more than a few words to him when she had sat having tea with him and Mistress Woodhouse. But she did wish that Mistress Woodhouse had introduced her as Sister Harriet, instead of Maid Smith.

However, in that moment, with the lilac scent about her, and handsome Master Elftyn before her, she could not decide if she wished to be Maid Smith, eligible for being matched in marriage, or Sister Harriet, the one doing the matchmaking. This bout of inward struggle, combined with the haze of lilac, made her feel quite light-headed, and she took a wobbly step backwards and put a hand out to steady herself on the post of the stile.

‘Are you unwell?’ Master Elftyn asked. ‘May I be of assistance? I am on my way to an engagement, but I could send for my housekeeper, you could sit in her room and recover yourself, take a cup of tea?’

‘Oh, how good and kind you are!’ Harriet said, full of renewed admiration for the handsome Master Elftyn. The smell of lilac certainly was intensifying his charm. So lilac-bound was she that she did not notice Master Elftyn checking his pocket watch with some vexation, she saw only that his fingers upon the watch were so very elegant, and he was so perfectly dressed, so smart, so neat.

‘It must be a very important engagement,’ Harriet said, regarding his beautifully tied silk cravat. It was surely fae-woven silk, for it glowed like dragonfly’s wings.

‘It is of the *utmost* important,’ said Master Elftyn, with a secret smile. He took something out of his pocket and looked at it, before pushing it back again. It looked like a note, folded tightly, just as a lady would fold a little letter.

Harriet was certain that it was a note of invitation from Mistress Woodhouse, who was taking care to cultivate regular visits from him in pursuit of her matchmaking plans. Mistress Woodhouse had said she would encourage Master Elftyn to drink tea with her father that she might have chance to observe him. And Harriet was sure she could smell something like true love, though it was hard to tell with the strong scent of lilac still lingering in the air. But if it was the smell of true love, who was it he loved? Mistress Woodhouse had dropped hints that she thought Master Elftyn a match for Harriet, but Harriet had not dared believe it. Such a thing was too strange; it did not feel quite right.

‘Is it...?’ She hesitated, then summoned up courage. ‘Is there... a young lady in the case?’

Master Elftyn looked surprised, then pleased, then coy, all in a moment. He laughed. Such a musical laugh. ‘Oh, that I had a Fairy Godmother to aid me in my quest. Are you certain you are quite well?’ He took a small step backwards, as though eager to be gone.

A Fairy Godmother. He wished for a Godmother! Harriet’s thoughts struggled again between whether she wanted to be Maid Smith, or Sister Harriet, between whether she wanted Master Elftyn’s heart to be turned to herself, or to someone else. The way Master Elftyn had looked at the note when the scent like true love arose was a very clear clue to Harriet’s senses, even with the blunting effect of the lilac.

A sudden thought struck her – there might be a way to discern for certain who it was Master Elftyn loved. She glanced behind her at the stile that led to where she thought she had wanted to go, and looked back at the retreating figure of Master Elftyn, *handsome* Master Elftyn who had the look and smell of love all about him – surely, *surely*, if she was not certain that he was *her* match, or if she even wanted him as a match, then could he not be her ward?

Master Knightley, blunt and brisk had not seemed to want anything of her services, but Master Elftyn, so very worthy of true love if ever a man was, here was he, so ripe and perfect for matchmaking...

‘May I walk with you to the end of the lane?’ she asked.

She was still too lilac-bound to notice the flash of irritation upon Master Elftyn’s face. But he waited for her, even holding out his arm. *So gentlemanlike.*

If Mistress Woodhouse could see me now, thought Harriet. *She would think her matchmaking was at work.* But still the waverings of Harriet’s mind swung to-and-fro, making her feel lightheaded, and glad of Master Elftyn’s arm. Was she Harriet Smith, the ward of Mistress Woodhouse, to be matched to Master Elftyn?

Her mind swung back to Mother Goodword and the school and her Godmother training, and she shook her fair head and shook the sylph charm from round her thoughts, and determined – *No!* She was *Sister Harriet!* And when she had proved herself worthy, she would gain her acolyte name and truly be a Sister and then a Godmother.

Master Elftyn already had a lady in mind, he had as much as said so, and Harriet was quite sure it was Mistress Woodhouse his heart was turned towards. And after all, who in all of Highbury was worthy of Master Elftyn save Mistress Woodhouse? It was a *perfect* match!

They were halfway down the lane and Master Elftyn looked upwards and gave a small sigh. Harriet followed his gaze and saw the clouds parting to reveal the tall, ancient tower of Hartfield. The tower of Mistress Woodhouse.

‘Do you go to visit Master Woodhouse, sir?’ Harriet queried.

He laughed musically. ‘I daresay I shall see good Master Woodhouse, but I go at the invitation of the *lady* of the house.’ He smiled and Harriet’s thoughts leapt. She was discerning correctly. This was wonderful progress!

‘You mentioned the help of a Fairy Godmother, sir, I am not of that rank, but I am a Godmother-in-training. I should be glad to assist you in any way I can.’

‘Would you?’ Master Elftyn looked at her. ‘Would you really? Can you give me a charm, a potion? A *love* potion would be very desirable, Maid Smith.’

‘Call me Sister Harriet.’

‘I have not heard of a flower of the name of Harriet,’ he said. ‘But, Sister Harriet, can you make a love potion? Or have you a wand?’ he smiled so winsomely that Harriet in that moment would gladly have given him a love potion if she had one.

‘Oh dear, I am sorry, sir, but I am not permitted to carry Mother Goodword’s wand, that must remain safe at the school, and we are not allowed to make love potions.’

‘Not allowed?’

‘They are too manipulative. True love ought to unfold naturally. Our job is to discern the right marriage partner and bring people together, not to make people fall in love who perhaps ought not to.’

‘Oh.’ His arm drooped, as though he found her hand resting upon it a burden.

‘Perhaps I ought to buy one from the next travelling roamer,’ he said with a wry smile.

‘Oh, please do not do that, Master Elftyn, I beg you! They carry dangerous things.’

He flashed another smile, but it did not meet his eyes. 'I was joking. I think I know better than to trust a roamer. And I think I have the power to excite a genuine love in a worthy lady without the need of charms. And yet... it does not hurt to have all the help one can get in such a matter, does it?'

'No, indeed! That is what we Godmothers are for, we love to help!'

'Then you will help me?' He looked eager. But then his face fell. 'But how can you help me if you have no charms, no love potions? What can you possibly do that I cannot do myself?'

'I can help discern if your feelings lead you correctly. I can discover if the lady you think of really is your true love. The heart is most contrary, Master Elftyn. It does play tricks on us, and people are not always just as they seem. One can get tricked by glamour and charm. I can help you see through all of that.'

Harriet felt a sudden surge of confidence as she spoke. For the first time in her life she realised what this matchmaking was all about, and for the first time she was sure she could actually do it!

She was too heady with her own excitement to notice Master Elftyn's look of uncertainty.

'I do not require any validation of my choice, Sister Harriet. I know my own heart, and there is but one lady in all the kingdom who holds it.'

Harriet sighed with pleasure at the romance of his words. 'But are you certain of *her* heart? Is it awakened to you?'

His confident look faltered. 'Well, that is, I cannot absolutely say.'

'I can help you with that. I can discern whether or not your lady is showing encouragement or not.'

'Well,' he said finally. 'Any help is helpful.'

Harriet joined in his titter of laughter.

'Thank you, Master Elftyn. You will not regret this. It is such an honour to have you as my ward.' A happy thought came to her, as though dropped by a fairy – 'Poem' she cried.

'Excuse me?'

'You must write her a poem of love. Or a riddle. We have ever so many riddles and charades in the library. I will copy out the most romantic one that you may give it to her. I may even write a whole new one especially for you! I have been practising.'

'Oh. Riddles. Most helpful, I am sure.'

They had reached the end of the lane and Master Elftyn set his handsome face towards the entrance gates of Hartfield and the beautiful mistress within. A gnome had obligingly opened the gate for him, he stepped inside, turned his head to give Harriet a collusive nod, then sauntered down the drive.

Harriet stood watching him go and pulled her cloak a little tighter about her. A cold October gust of wind came from behind her and beat against her hood and back as though chiding her.

She wondered why it should occur to her that the wind was chiding? She deserved congratulations. She'd had a breakthrough. She had realised that Mother Goodword's choice of ward had been mistaken. She was not to have been given stoic Master Knightley, who had no thoughts of love, she was always to have been given worthy Master Elftyn, so very ready to fall in love. Indeed, had already fallen in love, and deserved all the help she could possibly give him in winning the hand of his fair lady.

Mistress Woodhouse was by far the highest-ranking lady in all of Highbury. Of course she was his perfect match. It was a shame about Mistress Woodhouse's plans for matching him with herself... but what man could think of she, Harriet Smith, when Mistress Woodhouse was near?

ABOMINABLE FOLLY

Rue wondered what was wrong that morning as she walked through the courtyard to check on the wind vane. The copper fox pointed south-east, though his tail was twitching as though he were getting ready to move.

The wrong feeling was nothing to do with the wind. So, what was it? Rue looked around, using her senses to pick up anything unusual. There was a strong kilting in the air, as the fae would say.

Something else was odd, she realised as she walked back towards the school. She stopped underneath the chestnut tree and looked up. The chestnut sprite was not pelting her as she walked by. She felt a pang of remorse.

‘I’ll find a way to get rid of that tail if you show yourself,’ she called up into the branches, but there was no reply. ‘And the ears.’ Not even a dry leaf rustled. ‘I promise.’

Sprites understood the word ‘promise’ was important. All of faedom was highly attuned to the laws of promises and bargains. Rue waited a minute or two longer, but the sprite did not appear. Funny, she thought to herself, she kind of missed him.

‘Is all well?’ Rue asked on entering the Sister’s dining room for breakfast. Harriet smiled, but it was an odd kind of smile. ‘Wind’s coming from the south-east,’ Rue said as she took her chair and reached for a slice of toasted bread. ‘That burst of east wind yesterday is gone. The fox is twitching though. I wonder if Mother Goodword might be getting ready to move.’ She was not entirely happy at this thought. What would Mother Goodword say about the chestnut sprite?

‘Can’t figure out why the air feels so uneven, though. I know we’ve had some blunders with the wand, but surely nothing to cause this much change.’

‘You feel it too?’ Myrtle said, looking up from the book she was reading at the table.

Rue nodded; her mouth full of toast. ‘Likely it’s all my fault. Neither of you have done much wrong.’

‘I did have that accident with the chalk,’ said Harriet sadly.

‘Well,’ said Myrtle, ‘I suppose that explains the kilting.’ She broke off to sneeze into her handkerchief. Getting soaked from head to foot earlier in the week had resulted in a bad cold and a bad temper.

‘What explains the kilting?’ Harriet asked.

‘You and Rue using the wand. I should say we’re all going to fail once Mother Goodword hears of it.’

‘Oh, don’t say that,’ whimpered Harriet.

‘Speak for yourself,’ said Rue, taking offence. ‘At least I didn’t almost choke a man to death.’

‘How was I to know he was allergic to nuts? But I didn’t use the wand, did I?’

‘Perhaps not, but you did use up *all* your Dust, and we were told not to waste it.’

‘Oh, you’re a fine one to talk of wasting Dust. I saw you putting Dust on the muffins to make them bigger.’

‘Please don’t argue,’ begged Harriet. ‘Mother Goodword said we must work together.’

‘Well, where’s the wand now?’ asked Myrtle.

She and Harriet looked at Rue.

‘I put it back, of course,’ said Rue. She took a bite of her toast, then her chewing slowed and her brow furrowed. ‘Or did I?’

Suddenly she leapt up, taking the toast with her. ‘I’d best go an’ look.’ She scraped her chair back. ‘I remember taking it into the parlour—’ She ran from the room.

Myrtle and Harriet looked at one another in silence. Myrtle sneezed again, then closed her book and Harriet put her tea cup down and both got up to follow Rue to the parlour where the sound of banging and crashing was to be heard.

‘Blazing Bullfrogs and Blundering Bearcubs, I can’t find it,’ Rue moaned, emerging from under Mother Goodword’s desk on her hands and knees. ‘I don’t remember where I put it.’

‘It was only yesterday,’ said Myrtle, ‘it can’t be that hard to remember.’

‘I came in,’ said Rue, getting to her feet and scrambling to the doorway to re-enact her movements.

‘I had the wand in my pocket.’ She patted her pocket which only contained her near-empty pouch of Dust. The bronze key was jutting uselessly out of the lock on the desk

‘I took it out,’ she walked towards the desk under the window. ‘I heard a noise. I thought it were a horse, coming up the drive.’ She leaned across the desk to look out of the window. ‘I thought it might be Mother Goodword, but it were only the dairyman an’ his donkey.

‘Someone came in.’ She turned to face the door. ‘It were Mistress Perry, come to ask if we had any dried tansy. I showed her to the storeroom.’

Rue ran out, with Myrtle and Harriet following close behind. They ran down the hallway, out of the small external door, and into the cool, stone-walled storeroom where the herbs were dried and kept.

‘The tansy were on the top shelf, so I put the wand down.’ She mimed placing it on a shelf. ‘I climbed up,’ she pointed at the stool, ‘then I walked out with her.’

‘Leaving the wand on the shelf,’ said Myrtle. All three pairs of eyes regarded the shelf in question.

‘What next, Rue?’ said Harriet anxiously.

Rue shrugged. ‘That’s it. I left it on the shelf. I forgot about it and ain’t seen it since.’

‘Did Mistress Perry see it?’ Myrtle asked.

Rue shrugged again. ‘P’raps. She left the school. I walked with her to the gate. She were talking about Highbury having an odd feel in the air of late.’

‘Who else could have come in here? You did replace the protection charm on the door, didn’t you?’

Rue winced. ‘Blundering Bearcubs, I forgot. I were too busy talking.’

‘So anyone could have gone in,’ said Myrtle.

Rue groaned and slapped herself on the forehead. ‘Merciful Mushrooms, what a dunce I am.’

‘It was my fault,’ said Harriet. ‘If I had not been using it in the classroom, you wouldn’t have taken it from me to put away.’

A heaviness settled over the Sisters. They all continued staring at the empty space on the shelf where the wand ought to be.

‘Searching spells,’ said Myrtle decisively. ‘We must cast our very best searching spells and find it.’

Rue brightened at this idea, but then her face fell. ‘I’ve hardly enough Dust to scrape together one good spell.’

‘How could you use it all up so quickly?’ Myrtle exclaimed. ‘There was half a jar left last week.’

‘Well how much have you got left?’ Rue retorted.

‘That’s different – I was saving someone’s life!’

‘Please don’t argue,’ begged Harriet. ‘We must work together.’

‘You must have plenty left,’ Rue said to Harriet. ‘You never waste it.’

‘But I lent some to you, Rue, remember? And I used up a lot on searching spells. I have enough for a little spell, but not enough to search all over.’

‘Then we’re doomed,’ said Rue.

This was a bleak statement coming from Rue.

‘Rue the Ineffable’, her first teacher had called her. ‘Rue the Optimist’, Mother Goodword had often said. ‘Can-Do-Rue’, her Pa had joked. ‘Silver-Lining-Rue’ had been her Gran’s pet name.

Myrtle broke into a bout of sneezes.

‘Let’s sit back down inside while we think what to do next,’ said Harriet. ‘It’s cold out here.’

‘We got to write up a list of suspects,’ said Rue. ‘Someone’s took that wand and we got to find it.’

‘I’ll make you some speedwell tea,’ Harriet said to Myrtle. ‘And we’ll start the list directly.’

‘Thank you,’ said Myrtle, moving dejectedly out of the storeroom.

‘But what will we do without Dust?’ groaned Rue, passing her hands over the empty shelf, as though checking that the wand wasn’t somehow invisibly there.

‘I can do without Dust for now,’ Harriet said. ‘Until you make some more.’

‘How can I make more without the wand? But how come you can do without it?’

‘Because I think I have made my match.’ Harriet whispered, as though it were a great secret. ‘Or as good as.’

‘You have? Well, at least that’s one of us. Who is she?’

Harriet hesitated. ‘Mistress Woodhouse.’

‘A good match.’

Harriet flushed with pleasure. She opened her mouth as though to say something more on the subject, but then closed it again and fell silent.

‘Fancy you finding the courage to match Master Knightley, when you was so scared of him to begin with.’ They had left the storeroom, and re-entered the school.

‘Actually, Rue... it is not Master Knightley after all. I think Mother Goodword made a mistake. It was not Master Knightley I was to match with Mistress Woodhouse, it is Master Elftyn. He is dreadfully in love with her, though she does not yet realise it.’

‘Oh,’ was all Rue could say in reply as she digested this. ‘You sure?’

‘Quite sure,’ Harriet said earnestly. ‘No one could be more truly in love than Master Elftyn, and no one is more worthy in all of Highbury than *him* to be matched with the Lady of the Manor.’

Rue regarded her friend doubtfully.

‘Don’t look at me like that, Rue,’ Harriet pleaded. ‘If you could only see him for yourself, you would know it’s true, and Master Knightley has no interest whatsoever in being married, I assure you he has not!’ Harriet’s voice grew a little shrill.

‘All right, don’t get in a pet. If you say Master Elftyn is the man, who am I to say otherwise?’

‘He is, I just know that he is.’

‘Well then. You just go and see about that tea for Myrtle. ‘I’ll see if there’s any honey in the pantry. Nothing like our fae honey for a cold. Then we’ll put our heads together and figure out about finding the wand.’

Harriet nodded and left for the kitchen. Rue stared after her. ‘*Doomed,*’ she said quietly.

DISCORDANCES

Master Knightley watched the Last Apple fall. He had been watching the ceremony since boyhood, and never tired of it.

He only wished his brother were with him. He enjoyed a rare moment of nostalgia as he thought of all the autumns they'd helped to gather in the harvests: the cabbages and carrots, the pumpkins and squash, the apples and pears, and the last of the raspberries and peas. There was always satisfaction in seeing the full-laden baskets carted off into winter storage, sent out as gifts to share with friends, and the remainder sold at market for a good price. Donwell produce was excellent quality, irrigated by the River Don, with its source in Faerie.

Pride of place in the Donwell estate was the ancient apple tree – fairy-blessed to live for a thousand years and yield an abundant crop every year.

In times of drought and famine during the Dragon Years, the famous Tree of Donwell had supplied life-giving food to the village. When the Last Apple fell from the Tree of Donwell, then the harvest was complete, and preparations for winter began.

'A grand crop, sir,' William Larkins gloated, eyeing the baskets of apples being loaded onto the wagons. 'We'll do well at market.'

Master Knightley agreed. 'Send a bushel of the best to Hartfield,' he reminded his steward. 'And another to Dame and Mistress Baytes.'

'Very good, sir.'

'And take a sackful home for Mistress Larkins. Where's Ben?' Master Knightley glanced about at the workers for the steward's tall, curly-haired son.

‘He’s working alone down at the stable forge,’ said William Larkins. ‘Can’t speak well today. His mouth is all swollen up. His ma says he must have somehow eaten a nut. He takes ill in that way if he eats nuts, he fair chokes on them.’

‘Sorry to hear it. Send to Mother Goodword for a tonic, I’m sure she will have something that can help.’

‘Tried that. But she’s still away. Sent to the Perrys instead. Mistress Perry made up something with tansy which helped a deal. Master Perry says the boy will be fine in a day or two. ’Tis a mystery how he came to eat a nut. The boy says he cannot recall anything of it.’

Master Knightley’s ears pricked at this. ‘Cannot recall anything? Nothing at all?’

‘Well, just a feeling of having spoke with someone while he was down at the well, but he cannot recall who.’

‘Sounds like fae work,’ said Master Knightley thoughtfully.

‘Sounds like mischief work,’ replied his steward. ‘And there’s plenty of it about. Farmer Mitchell’s pigs all ran loose into Gypsy Woods this morning, and he’s having a job finding them. Mistress Wallis is having a job keeping her ovens from burning everything that goes in them—’

‘Yes, I know,’ said Master Knightley, who had heard of every grievance many times over the past days. ‘Something is out of balance, and I’m trying to find out what it is. I *shall* find out what it is.’

‘And Mother Goodword gone from us when we most need charms and helps. Folks are talking of getting their charms from the next roamer who passes through, if nothing else comes to hand.’

‘That would be very foolish,’ said Master Knightley. ‘I hope you tell them so whenever you hear such nonsense.’

‘Certainly, I do. I remind them of what happened to that old fool Peter Crofter. Bought himself a charm from a passing roamer, a charm to make the earth soft, to give him an easy time in digging his plot, and what happened? The ground went that soft it swallowed up his whole house and plot and left him with nothing but a patch of bog. Serve him right for trying to get out of honest work.’

‘Indeed,’ agreed Master Knightley, moving away, having had enough of his steward’s chatter. He could talk away the whole morning if he let him.

‘Who shall have the Last Apple, sir?’ Larkins called after him. Master Knightley paused and looked back at the golden apple being held out. It

was an ancient tradition that the Last Apple from the Donwell Tree should be given by a man to a maiden, and should she eat it, he would win her hand.

Master Knightley believed in upholding tradition, but he was not romantic ordinarily.

The faces of all the workers were turned towards him, waiting to hear who would give the apple that year. He looked around, noting that there were no unmarried men among them. 'Find a worthy young man to give it to. There's none present who need a wife.'

'Excepting you, sir,' said his steward.

Master Knightley stared again at the golden apple, and his right hand flexed as though he were half inclined to take up the fruit. But he let his hand drop again.

'How about your son?' he suggested. 'He's of an age to marry. Fine lad like him would make an excellent husband.' He gave one lingering glance at the apple, then made a farewell nod and turned away, striding through the orchard, and whistling to his dogs to fall in behind him.

William Larkins looked down at the golden apple in his hand. 'Good chance Ben would give it to the young coachman's maid he's been mooning over. The missus would have a fit if our Ben were to up and marry her when she's her heart set on him wedding the Martin maid.'

He shook his head of thick curls; the same curls his tall son had inherited.

'I'm not getting in the middle of all that,' he murmured. He tied a knot of twine around the woody apple stalk and put it on the top of the last bushel in the cart. 'Let Lady Providence have her own way. I know better than to get into the middle of any woman's plans, be that of the missus or Lady Providence herself.'



'HOW VERY COLD it has turned this morning,' said Mistress Woodhouse at breakfast. 'One would think it was January, rather than the mild October we have enjoyed.'

'I hope we are not in for an unseasonable frost,' said Master Woodhouse over his square of dry toast. 'What will happen to our parsnips and carrots?'

Master Knightley's poor strawberry beds may not have been covered yet, and I daresay his apples have not been stored away. It will be dreadful to have so early a frost. I do not know what Mother Goodword is thinking of going away at such a time, she should not be permitting such unseasonable weather. Everything seems out of sorts, Emma.'

'All will be well, Papa. The gnomes will see to all in the gardens. They are never taken by surprise by a change in the weather. They are far better than we at anticipating such things. They will have covered Master Knightley's strawberry beds with straw and put cloches over our root vegetables without a moment's hesitation.'

'I hope so, Emma. It would very dreadful not to have the usual harvests. It would be a dreadful sign to have the bounty blighted, it would portend something quite terrible.'

'I will speak to the gardeners after breakfast and ensure that all is in order, but I know very well it will be.'

'But what of poor Master Knightley's strawberries?'

'What of my strawberries, sir?' said a clear voice from across the room.

'Master Knightley!' exclaimed Emma with pleasure. 'Come and have some breakfast. What brings you so early?'

'I breakfasted three hours ago,' said Master Knightley, crossing the room to bow to Master Woodhouse and his daughter. 'Early is a relative adjective. But I will take a cup of tea with you.' He sat down between them.

'Take a piece of toast, Master Knightley, if you please,' urged Master Woodhouse. 'Or a little slice of this boiled ham, let Emma help you to a little slice of ham. You must taste the bounty, it would be remiss not to taste the bounty.'

'My dear sir, I have breakfasted heartily already this morning, but I will take one of Serle's excellent sweet rolls, if you insist.'

'Oh, I do not recommend the sweet rolls.' Master Woodhouse looked agitated. 'Too much honey is disagreeable on an empty stomach so early in the day.'

'But Papa,' protested Emma gently, 'you forget that Master Knightley is not eating on an empty stomach as we are. He has been up and very busy, I daresay, for some hours. One of Serle's sweet rolls will not harm him.'

Master Woodhouse's objections were silenced by this, but he advised Master Knightley not to put too much honey in his tea, for there was honey enough in the roll. Honey was very rich. It must be taken with prudence.

‘Papa was speaking of your apples and strawberry beds, Master Knightley,’ Emma said. ‘The weather seems to be turning unseasonably wintry today, and he is concerned that you are unprepared, but I assured him you would not be.’

‘The apples were all gathered in yesterday,’ said Master Knightley. ‘But the change in the weather is precisely what I’ve come about. The North Wind is coming unexpectedly, Master Woodhouse. I am sure you know what that likely means?’

‘Oh, my!’ said Master Woodhouse. And he trembled.

‘All will be well, Papa,’ Emma said. She looked to Master Knightley for support in this declaration, but Master Knightley looked grave as he dabbed a crumb from his mouth and put down his napkin.

‘I have felt something remiss for some time,’ he said. ‘The early arrival of the North Wind confirms it. I think it would be wise to go before the Green Man. Do you agree, sir?’

Master Woodhouse made a whimpering sound but was kept from replying by a sudden gust of wind swirling around the outer walls of the manor with such force that it rattled the windowpanes.

‘She must be here,’ said Emma, moving to the window to watch the trees of the elm walk bend in the wind. When the fierce gale passed by some minutes later, all the trees, saving the evergreens, were stripped bare of any remaining leaves.

Emma returned to the table. She knew what Master Knightley wished for her father to do. He wished for her father to take up his responsibility as the Wild Man Guardian. If things were out of balance, and Winds became unseasonable, it was the Guardian’s responsibility to find out the reason why and correct it.

‘Papa, will you not lead us to the Green Man to ask for counsel? Master Knightley will accompany us, I am sure.’

Master Knightley agreed readily to go with them, but Master Woodhouse trembled more violently, protesting against leaving the warm breakfast room to go through the draughty corridors into the Great Hall. They would all catch cold. It was hardly worth the risk.

‘My dear sir,’ said Master Knightley, ‘we need your aid if we are to get to the bottom of this turn of events. We have a responsibility to our neighbours to be watchful and ready to quell any mischief.’

‘I shall call for your house-cap and coat, Papa,’ Emma moved to the cord to call for a servant. ‘With your house-coat and fur-lined slippers you shall be safe from cold well enough as if you were in the northern mountains in winter.’

‘Oh, do not paint such a shocking picture, my dear,’ moaned Master Woodhouse. ‘Very well. I will go. But only if you wrap up, Emma. And Master Knightley, I hope you came here in your winter cloak. You must put it back on, indeed you must.’

THE WELL-WRAPPED-UP party of three entered the Great Hall, where the air was cooler, though a blazing log fire in the immense fireplace kept the edge off the chill.

Emma was already discarding her hood and loosening the ties of her cloak that she had put on to please her father. Master Knightley looked flushed with warmth within his cloak, but he kept it on for the time being, so as not to grieve Master Woodhouse.

They waited before the Green Man, who stood nine feet tall, his carved panel filling the length of the wall. Master Woodhouse took much patient encouragement, but finally he spoke, gripping his staff.

‘Here stand we before you, Guardian of the Forest,’ began Master Woodhouse in a tremulous voice. ‘With an eye that looks for good, and an ear that listens for truth, and a tongue that refrains from evil, and a desire to watch the border between mortal and Faerie, just as you have appointed.’

Master Woodhouse faltered, and Emma patted his hand. ‘Would you continue, Master Knightley,’ Master Woodhouse pleaded, his voice grown weak and raspy. ‘I am sure you will be heard. I fear I have not any more words.’

Master Knightley stepped forward, his firm voice resounding up to the high rafters.

‘We ask for wisdom in restoring the balance we feel has shifted. Please direct our eye and ear to see and hear that which will aid us in redressing any wrong, and let no trouble fall on us.’

Master Knightley stepped back again so Master Woodhouse could take his arm. All three stood for some minutes, listening to the sound of the fire crackling. The fierce wind outside was muffled to a harmless purr by the stout oak doors and the thick stone walls of the Great Hall.

The fire in the hearth gathered a green hue; the flames looked as long ferny waves.

Finally, the Green Man spoke.

The carved body and face rippled as though the wood became water. The pair of harts at his side turned their slender necks and large eyes towards him; the birds in the trees above him shook out their wings. He bent at his ivy-clad waist to look down on the three upturned faces, one elderly and pale, one young, fair and expectant, one tall and resolute.

‘There is a meddler and a thief among you,’ said the Green Man. His voice was of the deep woods, strong as oak, dark as roots, full of ancient life. ‘Bring the transgressor before me, before the peace between us ruptures.’

‘How shall we find him?’ Master Knightley asked.

The Green Man rippled as he stood tall, and the sound of rustling leaves and the scent of earth and moss filled the hall. The birds about him trilled and fluttered. ‘Open your eyes and ears. The evidence cannot be long-hidden.’

The fluid figure resumed its form of wood. The woodland birds were silent, the pair of harts looked away and were still. The face of the Green Man was stern, and the fire resumed its usual yellow flame.

‘A thief and a meddler,’ said Master Woodhouse faintly. ‘How shocking. How very dreadful. Whoever can it be?’

GRAVE DISPLEASURE

The copper fox lunged true north, the sudden shift giving him a surprised expression. The North Wind swept into the school.

The cuckoo had lighted on his perch to sound the hour, but the icy blast gusting through the hall ruffled his feathers and stole his voice. He put his head under his wing and waited for the storm to pass.

The tree sprites outside came out of hiding to see what was happening. They peered in at the windows, chattering like a flock of young starlings, pushing each other out of the way to see in.

The gnomess housemaid hid behind the settle in the hall to watch the visitor, for it was not every day that the North Wind came to call. The students and their masters and mistresses lined the corridors, hoping for a glimpse of the North Wind, yet fearful of her icy blast.

Cloe-Claws sat serenely beside the three Sisters in the entrance hall. Harriet was pale and quivering. Myrtle stood tall, her dark blue eyes as intense as ever, but with a tautness to her jaw and shoulders. Rue could not stand still; she clenched and unclenched her hands and shifted from one foot to another.

‘Greetings, Grand Godmother North,’ the three Sisters said in unison, bowing politely, then falling silent. The Sisters could say no more. They could not say that it was a pleasure to see their superior, for they knew the visit was not one of pleasure. They could not say that it was a surprise, for the fox on the wind vane had heralded her coming.

From the entrance door behind Grand Godmother North, the whirling, ice-blue shapes of her horses snorted and pawed the ground, turning every cobble their hooves touched to a frosty finish.

Myrtle nudged Rue's elbow to prompt her to speak. The Sisters had drawn straws to determine who would act as spokesperson before the North Wind. The short straw had fallen to Harriet, but Rue insisted she would stand before the North Wind in her place, seeing as she had been the one to misplace the wand.

Rue summoned up the courage to say what she was sure Mother Goodword would have said at that moment: 'Would you come into the parlour for tea?' Her teeth chattered as she spoke, partly from cold, and partly from fear. The North Wind glared round in one sweep of iciness, then stormed away to the parlour.

Busie had already laid the tea tray and poured the tea. The Sisters were glad of the warmth of their cups, and they huddled together before the fire. Grand Godmother North's teacup turned ice-cold as soon as she touched it, but she drank it down before gliding to the window and looking out through the frost-rimed glass. The sprites ducked out of sight at her appearance.

Myrtle gestured to Rue to say something as spokesperson. Rue wracked her mind for something polite to say, but everything seemed so trite. Foolish thoughts flitted through her mind, as they often did when she found herself in a grave situation, and she had to stifle down the urge to make a silly joke. It was the North Wind who spoke first.

'A rupture in the air of Highbury has occurred.'

Great Grandmother North stood at the window, her back to the Sisters.

'Explain the cause of it.'

Rue put down her cup and saucer and tucked her cold fingers inside the sleeves of her gown. She stepped forward, feeling the loss of the warmth from the fire immediately.

'There has been a theft, ma'am. Of an object of magic.'

'Which object?'

'A... a wand.'

The North Wind whirled round and a needle-sharp blast of air struck Rue's face.

'A *wand*. The great honour of a Godmother. The mark of trust between the kingdoms. The sign of authority of our Order. The source of power gifted by the Faerie queen. You took so little care of such a possession?'

Rue's lips were turning blue, and she blinked cold flakes of snow from her eyelashes.

‘I...’ she stammered through chattering teeth, her words making little puffs of steam, ‘I confess... I didn’t... take care as I ought... never guessed no-one would steal it... thought we lived among friends.’

‘Among friends,’ scoffed the North Wind. ‘Magic is a temptation to all. Even friends can fail if desire for power is stronger than affection.’

Rue nodded miserably. She hung her head. She had determined to accept her fate with dignity, but now that the moment had come, she felt only sheer misery at her folly. How could she have been so careless?

‘What have you done to recover the wand?’ The North Wind. lessened the frosty air about her, so Rue could speak without chattering.

‘We made a list,’ said Rue, ‘of folks who might have wanted something from the storeroom where the wand was.’ She pulled a roll of paper from her pocket. ‘There’s rather a lot,’ she said, letting the scroll unravel to the floor. ‘Anyone in the school or village could have gone in, it being unlocked.’

‘Why was there no protection charms on the door?’ demanded the North Wind. ‘Is Mother Goodword so remiss?’

‘It weren’t Mother Goodword’s fault,’ said Rue.

‘We did not renew the charms,’ Myrtle confessed. ‘They were only out of date by a day,’ she added as a weak defence.

‘A day or a century – a lapsed charm is of no use,’ said the North Wind icily.

‘We know the wand ain’t on the premises,’ said Rue. ‘We made a finding spell, and it didn’t show up within a quarter of a mile.’

‘Why only a quarter of a mile? Why have you not extended the search?’

The Sisters shared glances.

‘We used all our Dust up,’ said Harriet in a small voice. ‘And without the wand we can’t activate any more.’

‘Could you activate a new batch while you’re here?’ A tentative note of hope crept into Rue’s voice.

‘Do you think I would trust you with more magic?’ snapped the North Wind.

There was a dismayed silence.

‘This is my decree,’ announced Grand Godmother North.

Rue stepped back to re-join her colleagues. They would share their fate together. Harriet shivered. Myrtle braced herself, her face graver than usual.

‘There will be no resumption of magic or teaching in this school until the wand is recovered.’

There was a gasp from Harriet. ‘But the children?’ she whispered.

‘The children may return when the balance is restored.’

‘The school is to be closed!’ Harriet stifled a sob.

‘I take all responsibility,’ Rue said. ‘Please don’t send everyone away.’

‘Recover the wand and restore the balance, and they shall return.’

The cold in the air lessened. Rue could again feel the warmth of the fire behind her. She looked up in surprise. The North Wind had drawn in all of her cold, wrapping it around her so that ice glimmered on her pale blue gown and sparkled in her white hair like tiny diamonds.

‘You have one chance,’ said the North Wind. ‘If all things are not in order on my return at the end of the term, there will not be a second chance.’

‘We are grateful for your clemency.’ It was Myrtle who spoke. Rue could only nod in agreement. Harriet stifled another sob.

‘Have you no mirror to show you the culprit?’ the North Wind asked.

‘A magic mirror?’ asked Rue.

‘We have no mirror,’ said Myrtle.

‘Have you a globe?’

‘No,’ said Myrtle and Rue together.

‘How ill equipped this school is! I shall speak to the Council. It is fortunate I carry a pocket globe.’

It was always a wondrous thing to see the North Wind’s magic. She was very elegant and precise in her work. There was none of the excessive showiness of the South wind, and none of the bluntness of the East.

The magic swirled like a snowstorm, with all the beauty and symmetry of snowflakes. When the air cleared, there was a globe, the size of a prize pumpkin, hovering between them.

‘How beautiful,’ said Myrtle, who loved maps and atlases.

Grand Godmother North turned the globe until the adjoining kingdoms of mortal Old England and Faerie Albion were shown. She touched a long, white finger to the small depiction of England and Faerie, and they magnified; she touched again until the county of Surrey came clearly before them; she touched again and the little village of Highbury was depicted in close detail, its cobbled streets and half-timbered houses filling the face of the globe.

The boundary line between the kingdoms glowed. The Faerie paths were silver threads, winking and glinting mischievously as they came and went to the mortal eye. The Door into Faerie shone out from Hartfield, and the Wild Woods stretched away beyond the river.

‘I only see small magic,’ Grand Godmother North said, examining the globe carefully and looking at the pinpricks of light that signified magic at work. ‘That of the Guardians and fae servants. Apart from your school,’ she pointed an ice-blue nail at the schoolhouse which glowed brightly, due to her own presence, ‘there is no other magic.’

‘Then either the thief has removed from our boundary—’ began Rue.

‘Or is not using the wand at this precise moment,’ Myrtle interrupted. ‘And knows how to hide it in the meantime.’

‘Has there been any evidence of magic abroad?’ the North Wind asked.

‘Nothing out of the ordinary as yet,’ said Myrtle. ‘We have been exercising our senses all over the village.’

‘But all we’ve sensed is that charms are failing or going rogue,’ said Rue.

‘You have a cunning thief,’ said Grand Godmother North with deep displeasure. ‘One who knows, or has learnt, how to conceal their work. If word gets out,’ she tapped a fingernail on the road leading to Faerie, ‘there will be far greater mischief than even a petty thief could dream of. The queen will not ignore her gifts being so lightly treated.’

She touched the globe again, to hone in on the Donwell estate. Harriet leaned nearer as Mill Farm came into view. Grand Godmother North was watching something closely.

‘I cannot see evidence as yet,’ she murmured.

‘Evidence of what, ma’am?’ Rue dared to ask.

‘The bridge.’ Grand Godmother North, peered at a point on the River Don, close to the mill.

‘The darkling bridge,’ said Myrtle in an awed voice. ‘Could it open?’

‘Stolen magic is exactly the kind of power to open it,’ said Grand Godmother North.

‘This is worse than we thought,’ said Rue.

‘This is ten *million* times worse than we thought,’ said Harriet.

‘I wonder if we’ll see darklings,’ said Myrtle.

The globe was dismissed with a flick of the North Wind’s hand. Highbury and Donwell and the Faerie border shrank into Surrey, and again

into the kingdoms of Old England and Albion. They looked insignificant as they took their place among the great waters surrounding them and the mighty continents stretching away. The globe disappeared back into the North Wind's pocket.

'Find the wand, and quickly, before the bridge reopens and Highbury is exposed to the wickedness that haunts the Wild Wood.'

'You're not going to leave us?' Harriet said. 'You will stay and help us?'

'My foolish child, I have an entire kingdom sixty-one degrees north teetering on the edge of war between fae bears and ice trolls, do you think I have time to spare here in the little village of Highbury?'

Harriet did not dare answer.

The North Wind was gathering up the train of her gown. There was one question the Sisters had been discussing anxiously since losing the wand. Rue now found the courage to ask it, but her voice shook in fear of the reply.

'Grand Godmother North,' she began. 'Have we failed to graduate?'

There was a silence. The Sisters held their breath, hardly daring to listen to the answer. The North Wind looked at each of them in turn, as though peering into their very thoughts. When she spoke it was ice-clear, but not sharp.

'There is a shard of hope for you,' she said.

The Sisters exhaled with relief.

'Find the wand. Undo the damage. Complete your assignments. Let all things be in order when I return. But you must hasten. The bridge must not open. I would not wish for the Order to lose a new generation of Godmothers. We are needed more than ever in these times of Reason quelling Poetry, and mortals growing increasingly dull to the Invisible.'

It was clear that the North Wind was roused up by this subject.

'The folly of mortals, in thinking if they close their eyes and ears to their Faerie neighbours, that Faerie will cease to exist, when all that results from such ignorance in the name of modern advancement is a blindness to the beauty and the danger!'

As the North Wind's indignation waxed, the air grew cooler, and a glimmer of frost dusted the furniture in Mother Goodword's parlour. The Sisters shivered and huddled together. The North Wind gave a sigh, like a midwinter gale, and wrapped her cloak tightly to her to draw in the cold.

‘One last warning in parting to spur you to vigilance: if the queen should rise in anger against this carelessness, we may have a difficult political situation on our hands. Recall how many were blighted when Tom Huckaby dared steal a kiss from the Faerie princess? The whole county of Northmoor was driven out by Faerie knights. To this very day none but goats dwell there. Faeries are vengeful creatures. Their codes of honour are sensitive.’

The Sisters nodded miserably.

‘The thief is cunning enough to hide their work, but they will leave a trail of clues with each working they make. Exercise your senses to discern these clues.’

The train of her cloak billowed as she crossed the room, casting snowflakes and hail about the floor.

‘Until the setting of the Midsummer Day sun. I cannot cover this for one hour more.’

A wind arose, and the Sisters shielded their faces against it as the North Wind passed out of the door, down the corridor, out of the hall to the courtyard to mount her carriage of wind and ice. Students and teachers and sprites and servants all peered round doorways and out of windows to see her. Her carriage rose up with a roaring wind that rattled the windows and caused the heavy door of the school to slam shut.

She was gone. The Sisters staggered to the fireside where Busie had appeared, seemingly from nowhere, as she was wont to do, to pile on more wood and set the kettle on to boil.

Cloe-Claws stayed close to Harriet’s side, until there came a tapping at the window, and the cat jumped up to warn away the sprites who were throwing hail and snowballs at one another.

HIGHBURY GOSSIPS

It relieved the residents of Highbury that the visit of the North Wind had not heralded a harsh and early winter. October resumed its usual mildness, for Highbury had always enjoyed a temperate climate, due to its proximity to Faerie.

The gnomes and mortal gardeners had plenty of time to plant their spring bulbs, but their delicate plants had suffered in the great gale that had passed through.

The crab-apple tree sprites found sport in dropping apples on unsuspecting mortals passing by. The cavernous kitchens of Donwell, and the tall, airy kitchen of Highbury were busy with salting and pickling and jam-making, and preserves of all kinds, but despite the baskets and stone jars and barrels of produce, there was still a feeling in the air that something was amiss.

When something is amiss in the magical energies, the mortal inhabitants perceive it as things being ‘out of sorts’, or ‘under the weather’. But the fae folk are more discerning and feel the uneven shift in the energy more deeply. They lit their pipes or took out their knitting and spinning in the evenings and gathered about their firesides, telling stories of past misalignments and the steps the royal fae took to bring back order.

Unfortunately, an imbalance in the energies gives an opening to all the disagreeable aspects of human and fae, in proportion to their propensity for disagreeableness. The schoolmaster of the village boys’ school complained wearily that he did not know what had got into his pupils, for they were at best unsettled and at worst riotous, and thoughts of early retirement and a quiet cot by the sea became more frequent.

The laundry woman of Highbury grumbled that her suds would not froth, nor her iron stay hot enough, nor cease from being too hot to scorch – what was the matter with everything?

Widow Wallis in the bakery was so vexed with her goods coming out of the ovens with burnt bottoms, that she threatened to sack the baker and send him packing, which would have been rather harsh, seeing as he was her son. Mischief was afoot in Highbury.

Master and Mistress Perry, the fae healers of Highbury, were disturbed by the shift in the energies of the plants and herbs. They had to travel farther afield, beyond the village border, to gather plants, for those within the proximity of Highbury were most definitely ‘off’. The chamomile ointment Mistress Perry sold for napkin rash turned the Highbury baby’s extremities a shade of puce, which, while harmless, was alarming. And the hair-thickening tonic Master Perry sold to gentlemen of a certain age, resulted in all the male inhabitants over forty sporting ringlets beneath their hats.

Mischief was most definitely afoot. The unexpected arrival of the North Wind last week was testament to that – there should be no North Wind before Midwinter.

Word was spreading like dandelion clock that Highbury was not a safe place to be, and in ones and twos the boarding students at Mother Goodword’s school were removed by their parents, and mistresses and masters declined to come, and the school emptied into a sad silence as the classrooms and dormitories closed. Where Mother Goodword was, the residents could only speculate and shake their heads over disapprovingly. What were things coming to when their own Godmother had upped sticks and gone abroad at such a time? Surely the Wild Man would do something about it all, was the consensus? Master Woodhouse must go into Faerie through the door in the Great Hall and get help to put things right.

Even Master Elftyn, who lauded Master Woodhouse to the skies, had been heard to say that the Wild Man really ought to do something about this unpleasantness. What was the point of having a Wild Man Guardian if he did not do his job of guarding the village from mischief?

There were other rumours regarding Master Elftyn that flitted about Highbury like little sparrows, hopping from one parlour table to another. One pretty little rumour was that handsome Master Elftyn was a great favourite up at Hartfield, and it was not the Wild Man who bestowed such

favour. No, indeed. It was the lady of the manor who invited Master Elftyn to drink tea and dine with regularity.

Mistress Baytes, who was a great source of information, had speculated that there would be a wedding by May Day, to be sure. And if Master Elftyn, who was not poor, but not rich, as the village Master of Ceremonies, were the choice of the beautiful Mistress Woodhouse, well that only heightened the romance of the match, and it was most delightful to see a marriage of affection in place of a marriage of mere worldly gain.

Mistress Cole, who was fond of her own husband, but would not have been half so fond of him had he not had an excellent business head on him and a knack for making money, declared that Mistress Woodhouse must see some sign in Master Elftyn that showed he would be a good steward of the Woodhouse fortune he would marry into. Perhaps he would double it in no time through sound investment. Master Cole had always said it was a great pity that Master Woodhouse only sat on his money and did nothing by way of speculation with it. Investment and speculation were the way to progress. Master Elftyn would bring Hartfield into modernity.

Mistress Cox added that it might be a very good thing to have a new Wild Man at Hartfield, for Master Woodhouse was a very good and gentlemanly man, but he had certainly lost his wildness since *that* incident twenty years ago.

Here, old Dame Baytes came into her own, for she was of an age to remember *that* incident, and to relay all the details of the witch of the Wild Woods, and her vow of vengeance upon Master Woodhouse and his daughter.

And what did Master Elftyn make of all these flitting birds of rumour? Did he swat them away with vigour? Master Elftyn laughed and smiled and was very modest and humble and handsome, but he swatted away nothing.



THE LOSS of students caused Harriet the most grief, for she was very fond of all the girls, and could hardly imagine what Mother Goodword would say to know that her school had been closed through the Sisters' folly. The last of the students left, and Harriet was so distressed that she could not even

summon up the desire to walk to Hartfield. Not even Mistress Woodhouse could charm away Harriet's unhappiness that day.

The cloud of worry was strong over all the Sisters as they sat in their sitting room after breakfast. Myrtle was still nursing the severe cold she had engendered during what Rue called *The Nut Blunder*. The icy blast of the North Wind had not helped, and Myrtle complained she'd been set back by three days of illness thanks to that untimely visit. She deepened Harriet's misery further by expressing her frustration at finding no fae honey or speedwell in the storeroom to make her cold remedy with. Harriet had given the last of it all to Master Elftyn, of all people.

'Why take our speedwell and honey?' Myrtle had said in between sniffles. 'He should go and get his own from Kingston.'

'I'm sorry,' said Harriet, distressed. 'I did not think he would take *all* of it. I thought he just wanted to borrow a bit. He took all the powdered sweetbriar too.'

'Well, he's selfish to have cleared out our entire stock,' said Myrtle crossly. 'What did he want with it, anyhow?'

'I don't know,' said Harriet. 'I assumed it must be to make up a remedy for someone in need in the village. He is very kind to the poor, you know.'

'He's not kind to the poor out of his own heart, Harriet, he distributes aid to the poor because that's his job. The aid comes from the rest of us who pay our communal offerings.'

'Don't scold her,' Rue admonished, seeing Harriet's expression. 'She didn't mean for us to run out of the stuff.'

'I'll ask Mistress Woodhouse if her housekeeper has any honey to lend us,' Harriet promised. 'And I'll ask Mistress Perry if she has any speedwell or cold remedy.'

Myrtle had to be satisfied with such a promise.

'Can we get back to this now,' said Rue. She had the list of suspects laid out on the table between them; they had crossed out most of the names, and those remaining seemed unlikely thieves.

'The Quilly sisters,' Rue read, passing her finger over the names. 'They don't never leave the house, so they wouldn't be poking around our storeroom.'

Myrtle twirled her knitting needle about her fingers as she thought hard.

'The Coxes,' read Rue. 'They ain't shown any sign of using magic. Them silly Cox girls couldn't keep from magicking up gowns and baubles

if they had use of a wand.'

'I'm sure they were wearing new gowns yesterday,' said Harriet, her eyes widening at the thought of a clue. 'I never thought of it till now, for they often have new gowns.'

'Ask where they got them from,' Rue said.

'I shall,' said Harriet.

'The Martins,' mused Rue.

'They could never do such a thing as steal,' Harriet said firmly.

'We have to consider everyone a suspect,' said Myrtle, 'until we can cross them off the list. Robert Martin is always coming here. He's had ample opportunity to let himself into the storeroom. In fact, I would place him top of the list.'

Harriet gave a little gasp at such an idea. 'He comes here so often,' she said ardently, 'because he's so kind at helping. He oiled all the door hinges last week, and the window frames, because I happened to mention some of them squeaked. And he was kind enough to move the heavy desks about in my classroom so I could make some space for the girls to act out the stories. He even offered to play the part of Sir Greenshield. Such a kind person would never do something so terrible as steal.'

Myrtle could not resist a snort of humour over the image of the tall, young farmer in the garb of Sir Greenshield.

'All the small magic has gone topsy-turvy,' mused Rue. 'Whoever's got the wand is working against all the charms, either on purpose or to cause mischief, or 'cause they're using stolen magic for themselves.' She turned back to her list of names.

'Is there anyone in the village showing signs of increased prosperity or good fortune?' Myrtle asked. 'We must scrutinise everyone. Who is making advancement in business, or socially?'

'The Coles had a new spinet delivered,' said Harriet.

'But they've always been rich enough to buy things like that,' said Rue. 'It would likely be someone with unusual good fortune.'

'Or whose enemies are suffering unusually bad fortune,' said Myrtle.

'We have to keep watching,' said Rue. 'I'll divide up the names and we'll each have our list of suspects.'

'If only we had Dust,' said Myrtle. 'I think it very inconsiderate of the North Wind to leave us without magic.'

'We're not to be trusted with magic,' Harriet reminded her sadly.

‘Can I borrow your pocket knife, Myrtle?’ asked Rue.

Myrtle did not carry about a handkerchief and smelling salts and the usual things that a lady carried in her pocket. She carried a small, sheathed knife and several pencils, for she said they were more likely to be of use than court plaister and lavender water.

Rue cut up her list into three parts and handed them round. Harriet looked at hers. ‘The Fords, the Westons, *Master Elftyn*. It is not likely that *he* would steal magic.’

‘Everyone’s a suspect ‘til we can rule ‘em out,’ said Rue.

‘But he’s my ward,’ argued Harriet. ‘How can I suspect my own ward?’

‘Myrtle’s got to watch her ward, and I’ll be keeping a close eye on the Martins.’

‘Can’t we swap suspects?’ Harriet begged.

‘You spend enough time around him these days,’ said Rue. ‘You’re the best one to be able to watch him closely.’

‘I suppose.’ Harriet sighed. ‘Mistress Woodhouse has come up with a new project to keep him at Hartfield every afternoon, she’s painting a portrait of me, and has made him think it was all his idea. He comes to watch.’

‘Is this all part of your matchmaking?’ asked Myrtle.

Harriet nodded. Then she blushed. She was too embarrassed to admit that it was Mistress Woodhouse trying to matchmake Harriet, while Harriet was trying to matchmake Master Elftyn to Mistress Woodhouse. Rue was too busy examining her list to notice Harriet’s blush, and Myrtle was frowning over her own list, deep in thought.

‘At least you haven’t put Mistress and Master Woodhouse on my list,’ said Harriet.

‘Course not,’ said Rue. ‘Why would the Wild Man Guardian cause trouble by stealing magic? Not possible. The Green Man would sense stolen magic in Hartfield in a heartbeat. I hope you ain’t told Mistress Woodhouse about the wand?’ she added.

‘No,’ said Harriet. ‘I thought it too horrible a secret to tell anyone.’

‘Best to say nothing to no-one,’ said Rue. ‘Word would get round, and that might cause more trouble.’

‘Word might reach the Green Man, if the Woodhouses know of it,’ said Myrtle.

Harriet's blush paled away at the thought of the fearsome Green Man coming to life and looming over her, demanding to know where the Faerie-gifted wand was, or dragging her away into Faerie to face the court of the queen. 'I won't say a word,' she promised.

'Make use of all the time you spend out and about with Mistress Woodhouse,' Rue said. 'Use it to look about for clues.'

'I suppose I may as well get started,' said Myrtle, twisting up her hair and jabbing the needle into it. She snatched up her list of suspects.

'But it will soon be dark,' protested Harriet.

'The cover of night will be to my advantage,' said Myrtle. 'And I want to check the bridge. My research tells me that it can only be seen at twilight. I want to see if there's any sign of it.'

'You want to see if there's any darklings about,' said Rue, looking disapproving. 'Don't be taking any risks.'

Myrtle did not deny this, only saying, 'I'll tell you if I find anything,' before she left.

'I don't understand her fascination with darklings,' said Rue. 'It ain't healthy.'

'She wants to write a book on them,' said Harriet, who was very impressed by this. 'She's got lots and lots of notes, but she wants to see them for herself. For research.'

'I'll go out and have a look round for clues too,' said Rue. 'I can't sit fretting all evening. Do you want to come?'

Harriet looked a little stricken. 'I don't much like being out after dark,' she admitted.

Rue shrugged, but not unkindly.

'I'll go out at first light,' Harriet promised. 'Before I meet with Mistress Woodhouse. And while I'm out with Mistress Woodhouse, I shall be very observant.'

THE WAVERINGS OF HARRIET'S MIND

Harriet and Mistress Woodhouse were discussing ribbons with due gravity. There was a new display arrived in Ford's, the principal shop in Highbury, and Mistress Ford had done Mistress Woodhouse the honour of telling her she had a new consignment from town.

'Silk, velvet and *satin*,' she said with a wink. Mistress Ford's pleasure would have been curtailed if she knew how repulsed Mistress Woodhouse was by the vulgarity of winking. But a little vulgarity would not put Mistress Woodhouse off having the first pick at the latest haberdashery.

'Which one shall you have, Harriet?' Emma asked, having completed her own selection.

'Oh, dear,' sighed Harriet, finding it hard to concentrate on ribbons, when her mind was busy trying to observe everyone for unusual signs of magic. 'Which do you think I should choose? They are all beautiful.'

'The pink satin would make delightful roses for your straw bonnet.'

'Oh, to be sure it would. And I had not even considered the pink.' Harriet picked up the pink ribbon in question. The ribbons were pretty. For a moment she was pleasantly distracted from her pressing concerns, and managed to say, 'But then... the brown velvet would go so well with my winter cloak... and the blue satin is lovely, but I do not think it is quite the right shade of blue for my blue-trimmed gown, it is perhaps a little dark, what do you think? It's so hard to choose when there is so much to think about.'

'Good morning, ladies,' cried a glad voice of greeting. Harriet and Emma turned round.

'Master Elftyn, good morning to you,' Emma replied cheerfully.

Harriet flushed, feeling all the turmoil of her duplicitous position. Here she was, pretending to be but an acquaintance of Master Elftyn, when in short she was secretly in the intimacy of trying to match him with Mistress Woodhouse without Mistress Woodhouse knowing of it, while Mistress Woodhouse was deceived in thinking *she* was successfully matchmaking Harriet to Master Elftyn – and to add to this, Harriet now needed to observe him as a potential thief without his suspicion – it was all too much for her, and now she had the added pressure of trying to choose ribbons. She made an awkward bow, but her voice was breathless as she stammered out, ‘Oh, good morning, Master Elftyn.’



‘AH, *RIBBONS!*’ said Master Elftyn, raising his eyebrows knowingly, as though ribbons were some great beauty secret.

‘*You* have not come in for ribbons,’ said Emma.

Master Elftyn laughed more heartily than was required. ‘The time has not yet come for me to be sent out to buy ribbons,’ he said, with a meaningful look that to Emma’s mind almost bordered on a wink. ‘Only a well-married man would be sent out to collect an order of ribbons, I think.’

Emma saw his glance at Harriet’s ribbon as he spoke, and was well satisfied with his hint, even if it was a little glaring. Harriet would not notice his lack of subtlety; it would not trouble her. Even if he should wink, it likely would not trouble her.

‘Perhaps that day will soon come, Master Elftyn,’ Emma replied, turning to smile at Harriet whose cheeks were blushing as deep a shade of pink as the ribbons in her hand.

‘Indeed.’ Master Elftyn laughed again and looked delighted. ‘Perhaps that day *will* soon come.’

Master Elftyn remained standing before them like an eager puppy. Emma looked between him and Harriet again and felt affirmed in her decision to never marry – what folly love made of people!

‘Perhaps, Master Elftyn, you could assist Harriet in her choice of ribbon?’ Emma suggested, when he showed no sign of leaving. ‘Which colour do you prefer? Pink or brown?’

‘Or blue?’ Harriet said timidly, holding up the blue silk.

‘Oh, that such a decision as ribbons should be placed upon me!’ cried Master Elftyn, ‘I am certainly not equal to it.’

‘Come, come, Master Elftyn, we must get you some practice,’ Emma coaxed. ‘I think the pink, but Harriet likes the blue.’

‘Oh, the pink, the pink!’ declared Master Elftyn. ‘There can be not the smallest doubt, it must be the pink. Exactly so! Pink is of all colours the most pleasing.’

‘And why do you say that, Master Elftyn?’ Emma dropped her voice in a mock whisper. ‘Is it because it so perfectly suits my friend’s delicate complexion? I have often thought her cheeks the very colour of pink roses.’

‘Indeed, they are, Mistress Woodhouse, exactly so. You have perfectly described the colour of Sister... er... Maid Smith’s... the perfect colour, I perfectly agree with you. Pink is most decidedly of all colours the most pleasing.’

‘I think, Harriet,’ said Emma, ‘our decision is made.’

Harriet assented, though she still clutched the blue.

The tinkle of the bell above the shop door sounded, and beyond Master Elftyn’s shoulder Emma could see that Mistress Cole had come in with her eldest daughter. Not wishing to have it said that Mistress Woodhouse *and* Mistress Cole were the first to see the new ribbons, Emma made a prompt conclusion to the transaction that she might make her exit.

They made their farewells, Master Elftyn giving his assurance that he would not fail to call at Hartfield on the morrow, as agreed, to see how the painting was coming along. Emma entreated him not to forget, and she and Harriet gained the street outside.

‘Well,’ said Emma, pulling Harriet’s arm through hers. ‘That was a good morning’s work. Not only did we gain our ribbons, we gained further notes for our project. Master Elftyn’s unspoken words were positively crying out that he longed to be married, did they not?’

Harriet made murmurs that Emma took for agreement.

‘And could any man smell more deeply of love?’ continued Emma. ‘The whole shop was filled with the smell of roses. You did say that the *Dictionary of Smells* classes roses as the smell of love?’

‘Yes, it does. However, I think that was only Mistress Ford’s new display,’ Harriet said in an apologetic tone, for she hated to contradict Mistress Woodhouse. ‘Did you not see the pair of potted rose trees before the archway into the hats and gloves? Do you think they were real trees?’

‘Real?’

‘Did they look like magicked trees? It seems odd to have rose trees in October, does it not?’

‘I did not notice them. But regardless of potted trees, Master Elftyn certainly overflows with the scent of love. And what are you tasting now, Harriet? What taste is in your mouth after your conversation with Master Elftyn?’

‘Umm...’ Harriet thought for a moment. ‘I do not think I had much of a conversation. If I recall correctly, I only said *blue*.’

Emma thought a moment. ‘I believe you are right. You did not converse. We must get you to converse with Master Elftyn. That will be the next step in our venture. I shall contrive to leave you alone the next time we are all together, that you might have the intimacy of a *tete-a-tete*.’

‘A what?’

‘It means just the two of you. Talking.’

‘Oh, I see. I thought it sounded like a kind of cake. I thought you meant we had to share a tart.’ She giggled at her own folly, but there was something almost hysterical in the laughter, as though Harriet were not quite her usual self. Emma gave her a disproving glance.

‘Harriet, when you talk with Master Elftyn, you must remember not to giggle. It is perfectly acceptable, nay, desirable, to laugh if he makes a joke, but it must be a *genteel* laugh, and not a giggle.’

‘Sorry,’ said Harriet. ‘I know I giggle terribly. Especially if I am nervous or worried.’

‘Well, we shall work on it. I shall contrive to tell you a joke, and you shall contrive to respond with a *genteel* laugh.’

‘Thank you. You are very good to me.’

‘I only wish I could think of a joke. Why is it that jokes never come to you at the moment you wish for one?’

Emma’s searching for a joke was interrupted by a voice calling from above them.

‘Coo-ee, Mistress Woodhouse! Good morning to you! Would you have the greatest kindness in stepping up for just a minute?’

‘Oh dear,’ groaned Emma as they looked up at the opened upper window of the house ahead of them. ‘Not Mistress Baytes. I have not patience for her gabble this morning.’

Emma lifted a hand to acknowledge Mistress Baytes, who shook her handkerchief at them from the window. 'I cannot think of an excuse on the spot,' Emma murmured to Harriet. 'My wits are very slow this morning, neither jokes nor excuses will come when they are bid. I suppose we'd best step up and see what it is she wants. Do *not* ask her any questions, Harriet, for she will take a full half hour to answer each one, and most especially do not ask *anything* about her niece, Jane. She will talk of *dear Jane* till the cows come home once got upon that subject.'

They reached the door to the house where the Bayteses lodged. The maid, Patty, opened it.

'She is coming, Mother!' Mistress Baytes was heard to call out as Emma and Harriet stepped inside. 'Mind the step, Mistress Woodhouse!' Mistress Baytes's voice floated down the stairwell. 'There is a steep step on the turn. Take care. It is such a dark stairwell.'

The living room was small and humbly furnished, but a good fire crackled in the little hearth.

'Please, take my seat,' old Dame Baytes said upon Emma's entry. She moved as though to vacate her cushion-padded chair, which was the best chair among the furniture.

'No, indeed,' said Emma. 'I am far too warm from walking to endure sitting so close to the fire. Please remain exactly where you are, Dame Baytes. And how are you this morning?'

'My mother is very well,' cried Mistress Baytes, 'How kind you are to ask. She is remarkably well considering the unsettled weather we have been having. Unsettled weather troubles her health usually, but not this year, thank goodness. So far this winter Mother has not had so much as a tickle of a cough or a sniffle of a cold, have you, Mother?'

Dame Baytes opened her mouth to reply, but Mistress Baytes ran on. 'So very kind of you to step up, Mistress Woodhouse. Dear Sister Harriet, you have not been here before, but you are most welcome, any pupil of Mother Goodword's is most welcome, such a kind person is Mother Goodword, but I hear that her school is closed until her return, that is sad to hear. In all the years we have been in Highbury we have never known Mother Goodword to be absent, nor her school closed. What unsettled times we live in. My mother has known dear Mother Goodword for many years, is that not so, Mother?'

Every line spoken to Dame Baytes was shouted rather than spoken. Emma winced at the proximity of Mistress Baytes's raised voice. She tried to exchange glances with Harriet, but Harriet was too busy trying not to bang her head on the low beam of the ceiling, for she was crushed into the corner of the room while they waited to be seated.

'Mother is a little deaf,' Mistress Baytes said apologetically, 'but please sit down, please do—'

'I can only stay for a moment, Mistress Baytes,' Emma interrupted, 'we must complete our morning walk.'

'Do take a seat, take Jane's chair, we call that Jane's chair, you know, for that is the chair she always takes when she is here, she likes to sit next to Mother so she can wind her wool for her, I cannot wind it half so well as Jane does, but she does everything so neatly. How is Master Woodhouse? Dear Master Woodhouse!'

'My father is very well, I thank you.'

'Are you walking far? I am glad to see that you are both well dressed for walking, such good thick soles on your boots, I see.'

'We shall walk a little way down the lane toward Randalls. The lanes are pretty this time of year, though they are a little bare of leaves now.'

'So they are,' said Mistress Baytes, 'for that North Wind did blow everything away early, and now there are barely any blackberries to be had, are there, Mother? Barely any blackberries to be had, and Master Knightley was so obliging as to send us a bushel of apples, and Patty would have gladly made up an apple and blackberry pie, but do not tell dear Master Woodhouse of us desiring apple and blackberry pie, for he quite objects to blackberries, for he says the pips cannot be good for one's digestion, and he makes very sure that his cook strains them out most carefully before making blackberry preserve, but I daresay there will be no blackberry preserve this year for there are so few blackberries to be had.'

'You wished us to step up for a moment, Mistress Baytes?' Emma said, squeezing in her words while Mistress Baytes drew breath.

'So, I did. So very kind of you to step up, so very obliging, but I am forgetting my manners, dear me, what am I about this morning? Let me cut you a piece of cake. Mistress Wallis was so obliging as to send us a poppy seed cake, as you see, almost a whole one. We have the kindest neighbours in all the kingdom.'

‘I thank you, but we have not long breakfasted, Mistress Baytes. No cake for us, if you please.’

Harriet gave a wistful look at the cake.

‘I hope you will not tell your father I offered cake,’ said Mistress Baytes, ‘for I know he does not approve of sweet stuffs, but it is a very light cake, and barely burnt at all at the edges, for you may have heard that Mistress Wallis has been having difficulties with her ovens, they will keep burning things. She is sure that it is some fae mischief afoot, but she cannot get to the bottom of it. But there are many instances of such trouble in the village. I am sure you must have heard of them, Mistress Woodhouse, it is very worrying—’

‘Indeed, it is,’ Emma interrupted. ‘But I think you said you had something particular you wished to tell us?’

‘Dearie me, did I? What did I wish to tell Mistress Woodhouse, Mother? I am sure I cannot recall. I can be so forgetful, Jane would laugh and tell me I am quite a butterfly, flitting from one thing to the next, and I tell Jane that she is quite as pretty as a butterfly, do not I, Mother? And truly she is. Sister Harriet, you have not yet met my niece, Jane? I am sure you have not.’

‘Only in passing in the village,’ Harriet replied. ‘I recall that she was beautifully dressed—’

‘Oh, indeed! Jane is always beautifully dressed, and she makes a good deal of her clothes herself. She is so clever with a needle, you would hardly believe the beautiful things she makes – where is that stomacher that Jane made, Mother? Let me show our guests the beautiful embroidery on the stomacher she sent you. Mother does not care for the modern fashions, she likes to wear a stomacher, just as she did in her youth. Oh, you are wearing it under your house robe, I cannot show you it just at present, for Mother is wearing it beneath her house robe, but I can show you the beautiful workbag she made me, now where did I put it—?’

‘Really, we have but a minute to spare, Mistress Baytes, for my father will worry if I am not home by luncheon. It has been so pleasant to see you and Dame Baytes, so glad to see you well, and if there is anything I can do for you I hope you will—’

‘It is Mistress Weston,’ Mistress Baytes said urgently.

‘Mistress Weston?’ Emma stopped at the doorway.

‘Not Mistress Weston herself,’ Mistress Baytes added, speaking more quickly than usual, but with the same low voice. ‘Her *maid*.’

‘Which maid would that be?’

‘The young one. The pretty one. The daughter of your father’s coachman.’

‘Hannah?’

‘Yes, I believe that is her name. Such a pretty girl, and so pleasant to speak to. Whenever I pass her in the market or the street, she always smiles and bids us good day. A credit to her father, I am sure, and she having brought herself up, so I hear, after her poor mama died and her papa being out at work, it is precisely because she seems like such a nice girl that I wished to speak of her, but I did not know who I should speak to, I did not wish for it to be generally known, so I asked Mistress Cole who she thought I ought to speak to about it, and Mistress Cox came in, so we asked her, and they both agreed that it might be impertinent to speak to Mistress Weston directly, so I thought perhaps I would speak to you, and you could speak to Mistress Weston, for you are quite as a mother and daughter to each other, just as Jane is quite as a daughter to the Campbells, having lived with them since she was ten years old. *Dear Jane*, how we have missed her these past nine years – nine years, Mistress Woodhouse since Jane went to live with the Campbells, and they could not have been kinder to her for all the world – and it has been two years since we have seen dear Jane. Two years!’

‘What of Mistress Weston’s maid?’ Emma prompted, shaking her head free of the whirl of Mistress Baytes’ convolutions. ‘What is it you wish to tell me of her?’

‘Oh, Mistress Woodhouse, only that she has been *seen*.’

‘Seen?’ Emma’s vexation crept into her voice.

‘With a young man. In the lane. Patty saw them. They were *holding hands* Mistress Woodhouse, so there can be no doubt of their being, you know... I tell you because I am sure Mistress Weston would want to know if her maid were *engaging her affections*. It is always advisable to know if one’s servants have engaged their affections, especially when they are young girls like that pretty Hannah, and a young girl without a mother. We should *certainly* wish to know if it were Jane, would we not, Mother?’

‘And who was the young man?’ Emma asked briskly. ‘Was he a young man eligible for engaging the affections of a maid?’

‘Well, that is the concern, Mistress Woodhouse, that is why I thought that somebody, perhaps Mistress Weston, ought to speak to the poor girl, for the young man in question was William Larkins’ son, the youngest son, the

one still at home. I believe his name is Benjamin, you may have seen him, Mistress Woodhouse, for he is employed at Donwell, he assists his father, such an old friend is William Larkins.'

'I do not see what is the problem, Mistress Baytes. I'm sure William Larkins' son is not the sort of young man to trifle with a young woman's affections. Perhaps they are soon to announce their engagement. Mistress Weston will be sorry to lose Hannah, I'm sure, but I don't see why you consider the situation warranting attention. It was a little indiscreet of the young couple to be seen together in that way, to be sure, but if the Larkins' boy is an honourable young man—'

'But that is the difficulty, Mistress Woodhouse, I am sorry to say that Mistress Larkins has her heart set on her youngest boy being wed to a certain young lady, who I will not name, but who is not of the name of Hannah. And thus, I am afraid that the young people are setting themselves up for a great disappointment, for what good can come from a secret engagement of affections, without the knowledge and blessing of the parents? Indeed, Mistress Woodhouse, I see only disagreeableness in store for that poor motherless girl, and I would wish that someone kind, such as Mistress Weston, would speak to her. If such a thing were to happen to poor dear Jane, we would certainly wish that someone kind would speak to her, would we not, Mother?'

'I see,' said Emma. 'Well, I will mention the matter to Mistress Weston, but I beg, Mistress Baytes, that you do not speak to anyone else of this, it is a very delicate matter, consider young Hannah's reputation if it is got out that she has entered into an understanding without their parents' approbation?'

'Oh, I quite agree! And that is just what Mistress Cole and Mistress Cox agreed, as did Mistress Wallis, but we all agreed that we should not speak a word of it to anyone else, for the sake of the young people, and Mistress Perry quite agreed with us, for she came in also as we were discussing this.'

Emma could bear no more and determined to make her departure.

'Goodbye, Dame Baytes,' Emma called out to the half-deaf old lady, 'I hope you—' she was about to wish her good health but was arrested by the look on Dame Baytes' face – the sweet old lady looked positively livid.

'Dame Baytes, are you well?' Emma said, staring at her in surprise.

The old lady blinked, and her face cleared. Her usual countenance returned. It had happened so fast that Emma was not sure if she'd truly seen

the odd look.

‘My mother is not very happy with all the talk of a secret engagement,’ Mistress Baytes whispered. ‘I try not to speak of it with her, though it will spill out sometimes. Mother has very sensitive feelings on such matters. I daresay things were not done so lightly in her day.’

Emma nodded and left with instructions about minding the stairs ringing in her ears.

‘Goodness, how that woman talks,’ Emma exclaimed, when she and Harriet had gained the street and were out of hearing of the Bayteses’ window. ‘And to involve me in such a matter as though I were some matchmaking Godmother to wave my wand over the young couple and separate or unite them according to whim.’

‘To be sure,’ agreed Harriet. ‘But what do you think of them being in a secret engagement? I think it romantic.’

‘I think it foolish. It is never worth the disapproval of one’s parents for the choice of partner. Only division and misery can come of it.’

‘But if it is *true love*,’ sighed Harriet, feeling that at last something good had happened, for surely this showed that Myrtle’s matchmaking of Hannah was making excellent progress. She could hardly wait to tell her of it, but she must not betray to Mistress Woodhouse that Hannah Hazeldene was a ward.

‘To my mind, true love needs to have some practicality and sense about it or there can be no lasting happiness.’

‘Oh, Mistress Woodhouse, how can you talk so?’

‘I am not romantic,’ said Emma. ‘I have never been in love, and I do not think I ever shall be. It is not in my nature. That is why I would make an excellent Godmother. I can bring an objective eye to the matter of love.’

‘It is so strange to hear you talk so,’ said Harriet, looking up at her friend. ‘I think romantic love the most delightful thing in all the world.’

‘That is why you make an excellent ward, Harriet. And if it is your wish to marry, I shall not rest until I see you settled in a manner that is both practicable, sensible, honourable *and* satisfies your romantic sensibilities.’

Harriet only laughed.

Emma mistook the edge of hilarity in Harriet’s voice, not discerning that it was anxiety in Harriet that made her laugh in that shrill manner.

‘Ah, no giggling, Harriet. Laugh genteelly or retain a dignified silence. Young ladies should always keep their romantic feelings to themselves until

the appropriate time.'

'I will try,' Harriet promised.

BROKEN BOUNDS

Master Knightley burst into the drawing room and surveyed it in a sweeping glance. Emma stood in the centre, at an easel with a paintbrush held mid-air; she turned her head to look at him in surprise.

Harriet was perched on a stool, presumably as Emma's model, looking uncomfortable, but her interest roused by this sudden entrance. And Elftyn – he was to be found hanging around Hartfield a good deal these days – was sat on a chair between the two ladies, with a book in his hand.

'Good afternoon,' Emma greeted him, her paintbrush still raised. 'Is all well?'

'I am looking for your father.' He made a curt bow of acknowledgment to Elftyn, who stood to greet him.

'He is in his dressing chamber at this hour,' replied Emma. 'You know how he likes to dress early for dinner. Would you care to stay for—?'

Master Knightley turned and left as abruptly as he had arrived.

A few corridors, a staircase, and he reached the chambers of Master Woodhouse. He rapped on the door. Master Woodhouse's valet, a wizened elf who had served the Woodhouses for three generations, opened the door and eyed him warily.

'Who is it, Lowry?' Master Woodhouse's voice called from within. 'It cannot be Emma. Emma never knocks like that.'

'It is George Knightley, sir!' Master Knightley called out, before Lowry had answered his master. 'On urgent business.'

'Dear me. Urgent business before dinner. What is to be done, Lowry?'

'You must wait until my master has completed his dressing,' Lowry said in his raspy voice.

‘Has he breeches and shirt on?’

‘He does, but he has no cravat or—’

‘Then you will excuse me,’ Master Knightley said, pushing the door open to step past the valet. ‘He is dressed well enough to hear what I must tell him.’

MASTER ELFTYN RESUMED his reading of *The Epigrams and Poems of Lord Fairley*. He seemed to Emma’s ear to be picking out all the romantic poems, but that was very apt; how could his thoughts not turn to romance when his beloved sat before his eyes in her new pink ribbons?

*‘Fair she sat on grassy knoll, with violets sweet clutched to her heart,
And there did I, in one fell look, first know the piercing of love’s dart.
Up looked she—’*

‘I wonder what Master Knightley has come about,’ Emma wondered aloud.

‘Up looked she—’

‘It is unlike him not to stop and speak a word.’

‘Ahem. *Up looked she—’*

‘Quite unaccountable behaviour. He was positively blunt. Perhaps something is amiss. Something must be amiss. What do you consider, Master Elftyn? Did you think Master Knightley looked as though something were amiss?’

‘I... that is to say—’

‘I must see.’ Emma put her brush down. ‘I will be gone only a moment.’ She looked between Harriet’s blushing cheeks and Master Elftyn’s uncertain expression and thought it would be a very good thing to leave them alone for five minutes. Who could tell what might transpire between them?

As she reached the door, she heard Master Elftyn clear his throat and cease his poetry-speaking voice, which really was rather affected and ridiculous, though Harriet no doubt thought it fine.

‘I will read this one, I think,’ he said to Harriet. ‘*The Tolling Bells of Death do Knell and We Must Hasten to Our End*. It is celebrated for its iambic pentameter, as I’m sure you know.’

Poor fellow, was Emma’s last thought as she left the room. He is too shy to read love poetry to her while they are alone. This will not do, Master

Elftyn, you must exert yourself! *Faint heart never won fair lady* – to quote another poet.

EMMA PAUSED outside her father's dressing chamber. Through the open door she could hear Master Knightley's clear voice: 'My dear sir, you must attend, indeed you must.'

Her father's voice was too soft for her to distinguish the words, but the distress in his tone was clear, and she hurried in, anxious for his well-being and wondering what could be so important that Master Knightley should disturb her father at his dressing.

'Papa?' she said, crossing the room to where he sat. 'Is all well?'

'Oh, Emma,' wailed her father, putting out a hand to her. 'I am glad you are come! No, I am not glad you are come, for you ought not to hear this.'

'Hear what, Papa?' She kept her voice as light as she could and only threw Master Knightley a pointed look of enquiry. 'Surely our good friend cannot bear tidings so bad that I cannot hear of them?' She stared more decidedly at Master Knightley, while patting her father's quivering hand.

'It is my unpleasant duty,' Master Knightley said gravely, 'to inform your father that there was a sighting of the bridge this morning. I have just learnt of it.'

'The bridge? Not the—?'

'Yes. The old darkling bridge.'

'But that has been closed for a century,' said Emma. 'Who saw it?'

'One of the miller's boys.'

'Their word can hardly be trusted without evidence. They cannot be above ten years old. Likely it was only rising mist they saw.'

'There are other signs,' Master Knightley said. 'Footprints. Trampled hedgerows.'

'That sounds like the work of a stray cow,' argued Emma, for her father's sake.

'Cows have hooves,' Master Knightley said. 'The footprints had four-clawed toes.'

'Why should darklings wish to trample hedgerows?'

'Clearly they are of the heavy-footed type, who would plough through a hedge rather than go around it.'

‘Not *trolls*?’ said Emma, whispering the dreaded word as though it were too terrible to say fully aloud.

‘Oh, Emma!’ wailed her father. ‘What is to be done? There have not been trolls sighted in Highbury in more than a century!’

‘Master Knightley did not say that he actually *saw* any trolls, Papa. He only said there was possible evidence of them.’ She spoke soothingly, but she shared a look with Master Knightley that showed her true alarm. She knew he would not have brought such troubling news without good reason. There must be more to it than a trampled hedge. ‘And what would you have Papa do, Master Knightley?’

‘Assert his authority as Guardian,’ said Master Knightley simply but firmly. ‘Send all darklings packing in the name of the Green Man, before they move an inch further into our kingdom.’

Master Woodhouse was trembling all over. His valet appeared at his elbow with a glass of the master’s special medicinal wine. ‘Is it watered down?’ Master Woodhouse asked.

‘Indeed, sir,’ rasped Lowry.

‘Consider what Master Knightley counsels, Papa,’ Emma said, when the wine had been sipped at a few times and the trembling had lessened a degree. ‘He would attend upon you. You would not go alone.’

‘I cannot leave Hartfield, Emma. I feel unwell. I will not leave you unprotected.’

‘But I shall not be unprotected, Papa. All our servants are about us, and I am not without resources of my own.’

But Master Woodhouse was shaking his white-haired head, and the trembling of his limbs resumed. ‘You must not leave the grounds, Emma. It would be better if you would stay in the tower, you would be safe then. Do, Emma, do go into the tower! I think I must say the words, I think I must speak the binding—’

‘No, Papa!’ Emma spoke firmly, with a hint of panic in her voice. ‘There is no need to bind me there.’ She calmed herself into a gentler tone. ‘Drink some more. You must not get so agitated. As to staying in the tower and never leaving the grounds, there is no need for such measures. Master Knightley will tell you the same.’

‘There is certainly no need for Emma to be bound to the tower, Master Woodhouse,’ said Master Knightley. ‘She is confined enough as it is.’

Emma gave him a grateful look.

Master Woodhouse stood up, his eyes wide and wild, as though he were seeing something invisible, his hand stretched out into a pointing finger and he said in an odd voice, *'I'll be waiting, I'll bide my time, I'll have my magic, my hair, my shining, shining hair.'*

He spoke in a chanting voice. Master Knightley looked at him in alarm.

'The *witch*,' whispered Emma. 'He is remembering that dreadful time when she came and cast her threats and curses.'

She tried to coax her father into sitting down again, but he remained standing and trembling and pointing and chanting.

'Go beyond this tower, leave the Green Man's power, and I will have my magic, my hair, my shining, shining hair.'

'You see how it is, Master Knightley,' Emma said. 'You see how badly he takes any talk of trouble. Oh, Papa, do sit down, do be calm, all will be well, you will see.'

'Let me assist, my lady,' said the raspy voice of Lowry. He stood before his quivering master, and stretched up his hands to reach Master Woodhouse's head. 'Be calm, sir. You are the Wild Man of the Woods, you are the Guardian of the border, you are the Green Man's servant, you are bold and strong and true.'

There was soft magic in Lowry's voice. He had a small gift of persuasion, though he rarely used it, for it taxed his strength too much in his old age. It worked, however, for Master Woodhouse's trembling eased and the wildness faded from his eyes. He blinked and looked at his daughter. 'Emma?' he said, 'is all well?'

'Yes, Papa. Sit down and take a little sip of your wine. All is well.'

'Master Knightley!' said Master Woodhouse, seeming very surprised to see him. 'Are you in my dressing chamber? Why is everyone in my dressing chamber? What can it mean? Is all well?'

'All will be well, sir,' said Master Knightley, in a resigned voice.

'What time is it?' Master Woodhouse asked, 'am I dressing for dinner, or am I undressing for bed? I feel a little odd, Emma. I don't feel quite myself. Have I been sleeping? Did I have a nap? I am sure I had a very dreadful dream. I am sure I dreamt of dreadful creatures trampling over the shrubbery, oh, Emma, I am sure I dreamt of *her*.'

Emma did not need to ask who *her* was. 'It is time for dinner, Papa. Lowry will finish dressing you and we shall go down.'

‘I do not think I could eat,’ he said faintly. ‘I do not know why, but I feel a little odd.’

‘I shall order a bowl of gruel, Papa. It shall be made by Serle, just as you like it, with a little butter and a little salt. You know that a bowl of gruel always agrees with you when you are over-tired.’

Master Woodhouse nodded. ‘Very well, dear. Have a basin of gruel sent up.’

‘No, Papa, we shall all go down to the dining room, just as we always do. Will you stay for dinner, Master Knightley?’ She hoped he would. It would not be an easy meal to sit through with her father in such spirits. It would take a good deal of soothing talk to keep him calm.

‘I cannot,’ was Master Knightley’s blunt reply. ‘I am very sorry.’ He spoke these last words to Emma, who understood their meaning. He was very sorry that Master Woodhouse could not take up his duties as Guardian. He was very sorry to see Master Woodhouse reduced to such a state of terror at the mere suggestion of danger. He made a bow of farewell. ‘I wish to call in at the school library,’ Master Knightley said in parting. ‘There is a book of mine I lent to them which relates to the subject of—’ he refrained from the offensive word of *trolls* or *goblins*, or whichever word he had been about to say. ‘I wish to look up some facts that may be helpful. In the meantime, I shall set a watch over the border myself.’

Emma watched him go with a pang. She would have liked his help that evening. But there was still Harriet. If she could keep Harriet chattering her cheery nonsense at dinner, then it would go a long way to lifting her father’s spirits. *Harriet!* She was still shut up with Master Elftyn! For proprietary’s sake she must return to them immediately.



THE EARLY DUSK of October was falling when Master Knightley reached Mother Goodword’s school. The everlasting lamps hanging either side of the entrance porch burst into light at his approach, but the lamp on the left fizzled and sputtered and its flame was a purplish hue. Another evidence of the household charms failing. He rapped on the door, and it was opened, seemingly, by an invisible hand. He looked down and just made out the form of the household brownie holding back the door. ‘Permission to enter

and visit the library for important information,' he announced. He would never be so rude as to walk past a brownie without a polite word.

The brownie, silent as most brownies are, opened the door a little wider, and he took that as an invitation to step inside. A pair of golden eyes gleamed at him in the darkening hallway, and he heard a soft thud as the creature with the gold eyes jumped down from its perch and followed him across the hall and down the corridors to the library.

It was unusually quiet. At this time of the day there ought to be the clattering of plates from the dining hall and the busy chatter of a room full of girls, but there was only the sound of his own footsteps echoing through the hallways.

He walked on, not seeing anyone, save an inquisitive sprite who peeped out from a pot of autumn crocuses; he'd never understood Mother Goodword's pleasure in sprites, they were everywhere in her school; mischievous little things they were in his experience. But the flower sprite threw nothing at him nor attempted to beguile him. Perhaps the large cat padding behind him like a watchful shadow kept the little fairy in check; cats and sprites were not generally a friendly mix.

The library lamps were lit, as was the fire. He roamed the shelves, casting his eye over the alphabetically ordered volumes and murmuring aloud the titles tooled upon the spines: *'Tales of... Terrible... Thomas the... True Testaments of... where is the book on trolls?'*

'It is not under *T*,' said a voice from somewhere in the room. Master Knightley turned to see the speaker. The silver tabby remained watching him through slit eyes. 'Did you speak?' He had never met a talking cat, but they were not unheard of. The cat blinked again, but remained mute.

There was a rustle of skirts as though someone were getting up, then a short series of sneezes.

'Sorry,' said the sneezing speaker, coming into view. It was one of the Godmothering students. 'I have a dreadful cold. Are you looking for your encyclopaedia of Trolls?'

'I am.'

'It is not under *T*.' She moved to another bookcase. 'It is under *J*.' She pulled out the hefty tome he had been searching for. *'Jotnar, Skogs, Tusser, Huldres, Trows, and other Trolls: A Fulsome Encyclopaedia.'*

'Much obliged to you,' said Master Knightley, taking the book. 'I should have recalled its title. But I have never read it till now.'

‘I have read it twice,’ said the young woman. She sniffed into a large handkerchief. Now that he could see her by the lamplight, she looked dreadfully red-nosed and bleary-eyed.

‘Have you no healing tisane or potion, or whatever it is you Godmothers make, for that cold of yours?’

She shook her head, and strands of her dark hair escaped from what looked like a knitting needle holding it up in a coil. ‘All used up. Half the junior class had a cold this month.’

‘Perhaps Perry could be of help,’ Master Knightley said as he moved to a nearby table and placed the heavy book down. A little wind, like a sylph, passed through the room, ruffling his hair, and bearing the scent of roses. ‘Did you feel that?’ he asked.

‘Felt like a sylph,’ she agreed.

‘Did you smell it?’

She shook her head and sniffed. ‘I can’t smell anything at present.’ She took up a lamp and brought it to his table.

‘Thank you,’ he said, as the pool of golden light illuminated the book. He sat down and turned to the list of contents, looking for the entry on *Woodland Trolls*.

‘What do you wish to know?’ He did not reply. ‘About trolls,’ she pressed. ‘I have studied them. I can likely tell you what you wish to know.’

‘You have dealt with trolls?’ he looked up in surprise.

‘Not in the flesh.’ She sounded strangely disappointed. ‘But I’ve read everything I can find about them. Have you met one?’

He turned to the page he wanted. ‘Not yet. And I hope not ever.’

‘Woodland trolls are smaller than their forest counterparts,’ she informed him. ‘They feed on small animals. Their claws and teeth are not able to manage anything bigger than a hare, so they are not dangerous to humans, except...’

He looked up in expectation, but she had paused to sneeze; she blew her nose, and continued. ‘Except to their livestock. If they can access human habitations, they will eat up every fowl they can find. They will even eat cats.’ She threw a glance at the pair of yellow eyes watching lazily from the shadows. There was a soft growl in reply. ‘They’re also very playful. People think of them as all gruff and food-obsessed, but they enjoy their pranks almost as much as sprites do.’

‘I am sure their sport would not correlate to my idea of fun,’ said Master Knightley.

‘They will tease a human, pretend they are going to eat them or do all kinds of horrible things to them. But they rarely do.’

‘Rarely?’

‘Some trolls have less of a sense of humour than others. Apparently.’ She gave a little sigh. ‘So many *apparentlys*. So many theories. I wish to really know what’s true or not.’

‘One must be careful what one wishes for,’ was Master Knightley’s reply. He leafed through the pages, pausing to examine the drawings of the woodland trolls with their stocky body, short legs, long arms, and hideous faces. ‘It says here,’ he said, pointing at a line of text beneath a drawing, ‘that they dislike fire, lantern-light, and anything bright.’

‘Of course. That’s why they only come out at night. Sunlight turns them to stone. That was the curse put upon their race by King Deadnettle the Third back in the first Dragon Age.’

‘You really are knowledgeable,’ said Master Knightley, somewhat impressed.

‘Why do you want to know about woodland trolls?’ the young lady asked, eyeing him closely. ‘Have you seen one? Strange things are happening of late.’

Master Knightley wrestled in his mind whether to admit his suspicions. He did not wish to arouse alarm and cause panic, but neither did he wish to fail to warn people if his suspicions were correct. What a nuisance it was that Mother Goodword was away from home. Apart from Master Woodhouse, she was the only person who had any authority in such matters.

‘You *have* seen one,’ said the young woman. She had been watching the thoughts show themselves upon his face. ‘Where?’ she sounded eager. She leaned forward, and he instinctively leaned away, not wishing to be sneezed over and catch cold.

‘At Donwell?’ she pressed. ‘At the border? Near the river where the Wild Wood begins?’

The silver tabby had emerged from the shadows to sit close by, its ears pointing in Master Knightley’s direction, as though listening intently.

‘I have not seen one, but I believe I have seen evidence of one. Trampled hedges, footprints in the riverbank.’ He turned back a few pages

and pointed at a drawing of a troll footprint, easily distinguished by its four scale-like toenails. 'Exactly like this.'

Strange that the girl should look so pleased. These Godmother students were odd girls.

'I am going to write my own book on darklings,' she said, seeing his look. 'That's why I want to see them for myself. For study purposes. I have a theory that we could learn to negotiate with darklings. It would save a lot of unnecessary bloodshed and foolish behaviour by knights and would-be-heroes.'

'Perhaps it would,' said Master Knightley doubtfully. 'Though I'd be more inclined to trust to a sword than a negotiation if faced with a darkling.' On saying this, he got up and moved to the fireplace. A suit of armour stood against the wall. Above the fireplace hung a sword and shield. He ran a finger lightly over the raised design on the shield 'I do not advise you venturing near the site of trolls,' he said firmly, turning back round to face the young Godmother. 'You've told me of the danger they pose. You would not wish to be captured and tormented by them for their sport?'

'I would not let them capture me,' she said with a look of scorn. 'I am not ignorant of their ways. I should use a charm.' Her face fell again. 'At least, I would if I had Dust. But I would be sure to cover my ears so I cannot hear their lures, and I would carry a lantern. The brightest one I can find.'

'It would be difficult to open negotiations with a creature you cannot hear,' said Master Knightley dryly. 'All the same, I strongly warn you against courting such danger. What would your mistress say if she were here? Mother Goodword would never permit you to go seeking after trolls.'

'But she is not here.'

'By the by,' he asked, changing the subject. 'Was it here that the North Wind alighted recently?'

Now it was her turn to look as though she did not wish to answer.

'She did,' she said curtly, as though unpleasant thoughts were recollected.

'Was it regarding a theft? Was it a theft of magic?'

Did her eyes widen with surprise at his words, or only because she was about to sneeze again? Either way, she did not wish to answer the question, which only confirmed his thoughts. She had buried her face in her handkerchief evasively. Something *had* been stolen from the school, he was

now certain of it. Perhaps something belonging to Mother Goodword. He had thought an item of Lady Stormont's armoury might have been the stolen object; they had some magic in them, being fae-made. But all the pieces of armour, and the sword and shield were in their rightful place.

'We ought to work together,' he suggested. 'To see Highbury safe again.'

She frowned and stared at the drawing of the troll on the table, as though she were thinking hard. 'I am not at liberty to share certain things,' was her considered reply. 'It's not as though you have any authority to do anything, is it?' It was not said accusingly, only in a matter-of-fact way. 'You are not the Wild Man Guardian of Highbury. You cannot call upon the Green Man for aid.'

'No. I am not. But I will do aught I can to protect my neighbours. If I knew what exactly was stolen, I might be better able to find the thief.'

She was silent, and he had no desire to waste time trying to coerce information from a naive girl. He closed the book on the table.

'Where did you say you saw the footprints?'

'I did not say. I am not at liberty to share certain things. I will not be party to you endangering yourself. In fact, I forbid you from entering my land.' He stood up, his shadow falling over her.

'Forbid me? But I am a Godmother! We have the right to go wherever we choose when about Godmothering business.'

'Pardon me, madam, but you are but a Godmother *in training*. And until you are qualified, you do not hold such rights.'

She stood up, glowering at him, and would have said more, but a sudden fit of sneezes overtook her, and he made a swift departure from the room before she had recovered.

QUARRELS

Master Knightley found Emma on her morning walk in the grounds of Hartfield. The first thing he noticed were the shadows under her eyes, as though she had not slept well.

‘Papa is not in good health this morning,’ was her greeting, anticipating the purpose of his visit. ‘How bad is it, Master Knightley? Did you check the bridge last night?’

‘I did. And I did not see it.’

‘So the miller’s boy *was* mistaken. I thought as much!’

‘Not necessarily. I believe it was the use of stolen magic that opened the bridge yesterday. If so, the bridge will grow stronger the more magic is used.’

‘I wish I could persuade Papa to do something,’ Emma said wearily. ‘I have thought it over all night, but the harder I press him, the more agitated he grows. I fear for his health, I fear for his mind, and I fear he will speak the binding and shut me up in the tower for my safety.’ She gave a little shiver.

‘I hardly know what to do for the best,’ Master Knightley admitted. ‘Your father is the only man with any authority in this matter.’

‘Are things really so bad? I do not call burnt cakes and skittish horses truly serious. They are inconveniences, but surely not serious enough for Papa to be made so anxious over.’

‘It will get a little worse day by day,’ Master Knightley replied. ‘It may be minor things now, but if the bridge is opening, all manner of mischief may ensue. Loss of livestock, possessions, even people’s lives, if they are lured away into Faerie. I have not seen the bridge myself, but there’s a

definite shift in the air at that part of the river. It's heavier and darker. Like a gloom has settled over the water.'

'Gloom has settled over us,' said Emma. 'Papa cannot bear it when the Green Man is displeased, he takes it very personally. He feels he has failed as the Guardian of Highbury.'

'But he has, my dear Emma,' said Master Knightley gently. 'If he could but exert himself to action, I'm sure we could find the source of the unlawful magic quickly. With his staff of authority, he could demand any stolen magic show itself, and we should soon trace the culprit. But he would need to leave the grounds of Hartfield and go among the people to do so.'

'I will speak to him again,' said Emma. 'When he is stronger.' She cast her eyes upon the dark yew hedge that bordered one end of the shrubbery. 'It is no easy thing to keep his spirits up. And if he falls into depression again, I have not the heart for another long winter trying to coax him out of it. This winter seems to stretch out too long as it is, now that Mistress Weston is with me no more. She was so good at helping with Papa.'

'I do understand. I will watch the border, and I think we ought not to rouse anxiety in the village by talking of this until there is something substantial to speak of.'

'Then I hope that nothing further is seen of the bridge,' said Emma. 'And I shall exert myself about the village. Harriet and I are trying to sense anything unusual. May I tell her of what we know? It may be helpful if the Godmothering students were to aid in finding any clue to the stolen magic.'

'I suspect they already know more than they care to say,' said Master Knightley. 'They're very secretive about their work. I don't think you will get much compliance from them.'

'I think I may,' argued Emma. 'I am learning of their ways. Harriet is teaching me.'

'What, are you training to be a Godmother?'

'Have you not heard? I thought I told you I was considering such a vocation.'

'Perhaps you did. I recollect something. I confess I thought it another of your passing schemes. I didn't realise you were actually applying yourself.'

'Well, I am,' said Emma firmly.

They fell silent for some minutes as they walked with enough briskness to keep the morning chill at bay. When Master Knightley spoke again, his voice was lighter, as though he wished to change the subject.

‘I see your young Godmother friend has successfully replaced Mistress Weston’s company.’

‘No one could ever replace Mistress Weston. But Harriet is a sweet girl, and I’m glad of her company. And Papa likes her.’

‘She is not your equal, Emma. I could wish to see you with a companion worthy of you, rather than some silly student.’

‘Harriet is as good-hearted a person as any I could find in all of Highbury, and she is not a silly student. She is educated, and is clearly the daughter of someone of excellent standing.’

‘Excellent standing? What gives you that fanciful notion?’

‘They placed her in a Godmothering school, an excellent school, a very special school, there are but two in all the kingdom.’

‘Very well, she was placed in an especial school, but she has shown no especial aptitude for being a Godmother herself, or she would have been granted an acolyte title by this time.’

‘That is because she is not yet eighteen,’ argued Emma, not entirely sure if this were true or not, but it suited her purpose to believe it. ‘She is too young to choose her future path, as Godmother or otherwise. And whoever put her there,’ she continued, ‘wanted the best for her, and knew she would receive the utmost care and attention. That tells me she is valued, and not from some coarse farmer or shopkeeper’s family.’

‘Do you say that farmers and shopkeepers do not value their children?’

‘Oh, very well, I have used a weak argument. but I am convinced that Harriet is above all commonality, one only has to look at her features to see that. She has not the peasant-like round face and chin of a commoner. You must have observed the shape of her eyes and the line of her cheekbone. And consider her nose!’

Master Knightley shook his head. ‘I observe that she has been left to shift for herself. And that incessant giggling of hers!’

Emma was well used to disagreeing with Master Knightley, so she did not trouble herself to be really annoyed, but her voice grew a little warmer.

‘I wholly disagree. Harriet has too much natural grace and elegance about her to be anything other than the daughter of somebody refined. And she does not giggle incessantly.’

‘Ah, well,’ said Master Knightley, swishing his walking cane through the air before them to remove a dew-laden spider web that hung across the

path. 'Keep to your romantic notions, Emma, if you choose. But she certainly does giggle incessantly.'

'There are worse habits than laughter,' replied Emma archly, never liking to not have the last word in one of her debates with Master Knightley. 'Seeing fault in everyone is a more unpleasant habit to live with.'

'Never seeing fault in oneself is far worse,' parried Master Knightley.

'I know *you* love to find fault with me, but I assure you I shall prove you wrong regarding Harriet. She only wants a little improvement in manners, it is not her fault she lives surrounded by schoolgirls. I shall introduce her to good society, and you shall see her true worth before long.'

'Ah, so she is to be your new pet project, is she?'

'She is not a *pet*, nor a project. She is a dear friend whom I have determined to notice and raise up.'

'Just as I said,' replied Master Knightley with a disarming smile. Emma was part vexed, part amused.

'You shall soon see. And you shall retract your ungallant words to my friend.'

Master Knightley generally did allow Emma to have the last word and so said no more on the subject of Harriet Smith. He had only encouraged the nonsense of their argument partly because he enjoyed it as a longstanding habit of theirs, and in part because it was a welcome, if brief, diversion from the concerns pressing upon him. He looked about them, noting the bare branches of the trees from the devastation of the untimely North Wind.

'If only Mother Goodword were here,' said Emma. 'It is unaccountable that she should be away at such a time. I suppose you know that the school is all closed down, and the Sisters have no recourse to any magic to aid them.'

'Yes. I was at the school yesterday evening.' 'Does your little friend have any clue what object of magic has been stolen? I asked one of the other students, but she would not tell me.'

'Harriet will not say either,' said Emma. 'She is silent about some things relating to Godmothering. I understand they make oaths of secrecy on some matters.' Emma's disapproval of this was evident. 'I will speak to Papa again,' she promised. 'And I will exert my sensing practise more fully to find some clue as to the thief. If we could only find him, Papa would not need to do anything beyond presenting the thief, would he?'

There was a hopeful note in her voice. Master Knightley did not reply, so she ran on.

‘There must be signs and clues. It is not possible to use stolen magic and it not be noticed in time. I will even call upon persons I take no pleasure in calling upon,’ she said with a noble air. ‘I will call upon as many persons in the village as I can, and exercise my senses on them all.’

Master Knightley’s mouth twitched, as though he were suppressing a smile, but he was quick to subdue it.

‘And I shall continue watching the border,’ he said. ‘Perhaps the time has come to take down the old dragon slayer from above the mantel and polish it up, hilt and blade.’ He smiled, but there was a look in his eye that showed that he was not joking.

‘As if your housekeeper didn’t keep it well polished already,’ said Emma. But she did not return his smile. If Master Knightley was considering taking up the ancient sword of the knights of Donwell, then things were more serious than she liked to think.

A VERY HANDSOME LETTER

Emma was not one to dwell long on disagreeable things, if she could help it, and not one to shy away from agreeable things, where they proved a pleasant distraction. The concerns of Master Knightley over the darkling bridge were very disagreeable, while Emma's matchmaking plans were not. Thus, she was glad to continue in her work, all in the name of important Godmothering study.

Harriet's portrait was completed, and admired, especially by Master Elftyn, who was so smitten a lover that he had volunteered to take the precious painting all the way to town to be framed. Master Woodhouse's entreaties to him to stay home in the warm and dry fell on deaf ears, Master Elftyn would go. What fear had he for catching cold? None. What was a sixteen-mile ride in wintry cold and mizzle? They were nothing to him. He was a man with a commission for a fair lady. Emma and Harriet stood at the manor entrance and waved him off with the rolled-up painting secured in his saddlebag.

'How gallant he looks on horseback,' Harriet said as he trotted down the drive. She glanced at Mistress Woodhouse to see if she agreed. 'How smart his riding coat is. I always think so when I see him ride by.'

Master Elftyn turned in the saddle to wave one last time, then was hidden by the curve of the sweep.

'Let's go in,' said Emma, turning away. 'It's too cold to stand out. We shall warm up with tea.'

EMMA ALLOWED Harriet to muse over her happy thoughts of Master Elftyn and his riding coat while they sipped their tea. She was not mistaken in thinking Harriet's thoughts were of Master Elftyn, but she would have been very surprised if she had known that sweet, artless Harriet was artfully considering the composition of a love riddle, for she had promised to write one for Master Elftyn. He would use it as his next move in gaining the affections of Emma.

Harriet did not find riddles easy, but she was determined to excel herself on this occasion. Her thoughts were interrupted by Emma saying, 'I can guess what you are thinking of, Harriet.'

Harriet blushed, feeling all the confusion of her duplicity. 'Riddles,' she said reflexively.

'Riddles? Why, Harriet, you surprise me. I imagined your thoughts lay in a more interesting direction. The direction of the road between Highbury and London, to be precise.'

'I forgot to bring my riddle book with me this morning.' Another blush of shame. 'We did say we would work on it today as part of our studies.'

In truth, they were running out of things to do as part of their studies. They had all but given up on the sitting in silence, Emma claiming that it was probably something that ought to be practised in solitude. And Emma had no patience for reading *The Godmother's Book of Proverbial Wisdom*; she had tried again that morning and the page had opened to:

*Only a foolish soul diverts the path of true love,
A wise woman will let it run its course.*

'Stuff and nonsense,' Emma had said in annoyance. 'Godmothers shape the path of true love, do they not? Otherwise, what is all their matchmaking about?'

As if in answer, her eyes were drawn to the next lines.

*A wise woman works according to good counsel,
Fools rush headlong into fancy.*

She had closed the book and was determined to read it no more.

It was too cold to go out visiting and practising sensing for very long. Master Woodhouse grew anxious for his daughter's health if she were outside in wintertime more than a half hour. The portrait painting had taken up much of their study time of late, but that was all in the service of matchmaking, so that was all very well, but now they must exert themselves

to something useful and fill up their notebooks ready to show Mother Goodword, when she returned.

‘I shall run home and fetch my riddle book,’ Harriet said decidedly, thinking that she could compose at least two lines, if not two couplets, on the walk home. ‘I shall be back by dinner.’

‘Very good,’ agreed Emma. ‘Try not to get distracted by the window display at Ford’s.’

‘No, indeed,’ Harriet promised. ‘I shall close my eyes as I step past it and not look once at that delightful little bonnet in the window, though it has silk flowers on the band in the prettiest shade of blue. Just like tiny forget-me-nots. I was once told that my eyes are the very colour of forget-me-nots.’ She laughed and dimpled, and then she looked wistful.

Emma smiled indulgently. She considered Harriet’s great pleasure in nice clothes another sure sign that Harriet was not meant for a future as a Godmother, but as a young bride. Should Harriet gain her acolyte status, she would have to wear the prescribed gown of plain drab. This was a factor that troubled Emma greatly, as she could not see herself in such a gown. She did not think herself vain, but she did consider being well dressed as much of a necessity to life as bread and salt. She would deal with that disagreeable matter when the time came and find a way round it.

Harriet left, and Emma busied herself about the house, checking that all things were in order in the linen chests and the pantries, and that her father was still quietly drowsing beside the fireplace.

How strange life seemed at present, Emma mused, as she walked about the house. It was like living in two worlds. On the one hand, there was this horrible feeling of disorder in the air; a nagging worry, like a troublesome hobgoblin, knocking and banging away in another room. But on the other hand, life went on. People were dissatisfied with the small magic being wayward – charms failing or turning rogue, but as yet, the problems did not really harm anyone so much as irritate them.

Of course, the villagers were not thinking of the bridge opening. It had not opened in anyone’s living memory. Thus, life continued, very much as before, even if the linen did not return from the laundress quite as white as usual, or the winter turnips were dug up in the shape of long, thin carrots, or the ale at the Crown had an aftertaste of pepper.

‘Such odd days,’ Emma said to herself as she returned to the common sitting room, and stood before the fireplace. She would hang Harriet’s

portrait there when it returned. At least one agreeable thing was happening – there was sure to be a wedding in Highbury by Midsummer, if not by May Day.

She could readily picture Harriet in her wedding gown, with as many pink ribbons as she chose on her bonnet, holding a bunch of sweet flowers and showering Mistress Woodhouse – her clever matchmaking Godmother, her best and dearest friend, her kindly patroness – with thanks for all the felicity and joy she now knew as the wife of the best gentleman in all of Highbury. It was a very agreeable picture.

Harriet returned much sooner than expected. She came careering into the sitting room where Emma was still standing before the imagined portrait, lost in admiration of her own merits.

‘Harriet, what is the meaning of this?’ said Emma, turning around, amazed at the flushed cheeks, wild eyes and unruly hair of her friend. After all her efforts to improve Harriet’s looks and posture and manner of walking, and here she was running through Highbury as though chased by the Wild Hunt!

‘Oh, Mistress Woodhouse!’ was all Harriet could gasp out, and she waved a letter in a trembling hand.

It all came out in fits and bursts between sharp administrations from Emma for calm and poise, and a few sips of Master Woodhouse’s becalming wine.

Harriet had returned to the school to discover that none other than Robert Martin had called an hour earlier and not finding Harriet at home had left a parcel for her. This was no very remarkable occurrence, for he often called at the school to assist with something, or to deliver to Harriet a note or gift from his sisters or mother. Inside the parcel were some music sheets that Harriet had lent to Elizabeth Martin, and beneath the music sheets had lain— ‘Oh, what do think?’ cried Harriet, ‘whatever do you think, Mistress Woodhouse! Only think of it – so extraordinary! A letter! A letter from *him*.’

‘Him?’

‘Master Martin!’

‘How inappropriate. How very forward and unmannerly. No man ought to send a young lady private letters unless they are engaged.’

‘It was a letter, such a letter – oh, Mistress Woodhouse, I thought I should faint on reading it – I never was so very surprised in all my life!’

‘Harriet, please. Calmness, decorum, restraint. What was in this impudent letter of his that has unsettled you so?’

‘A proposal of marriage!’

‘Upon my word!’

‘Will you read it?’ begged Harriet. ‘Pray do. I’d rather you would.’

The letter was duly read with a mixture of disdain and curiosity. To Emma’s great surprise it was well worded, plain and to the point, but expressing sentiments of love most warmly and without anything she could object to, and all was written in a neat, sure hand.

‘Well, well,’ fretted Harriet, watching as the letter was scanned a second time. ‘Is it a good letter? Or is it too short?’

‘Yes, indeed, a very good letter.’ Emma hated to admit it, but she could not tell a lie. ‘So good a letter, Harriet, that everything considered, I think one of his sisters must have helped him.’

Harriet’s face fell a little, and she took the letter back. ‘Well,’ said Harriet, ‘and what shall I do?’

Emma was astonished that Harriet should have any doubts on that score. She was about to state that of course Harriet must write an immediate, clearly-worded reply of decline, when the words of the *Proverbial Wisdom* book popped into her mind in a most unwelcome manner:

*Only a foolish soul diverts the path of true love,
A wise woman will let it run its course.*

There is no true love in *this* case, Emma argued within herself, but she was checked from her initial speech by this interruption to her thoughts, and instead said, ‘I shall not give you any advice, Harriet, I will have nothing to do with it. This is a point which you must settle with your feelings.’

Even while speaking, Emma was suddenly aware to some degree of what Harriet’s feelings were. Perhaps the practise of sensing had been better than she had realised, for she could sense most strongly that Harriet was much inclined to feel favourable towards the impudent author of that wretched letter. She could feel the pulsation of alternate waves of energy from her friend as she wavered between warmth and strong attraction to the writer, and then a halting uncertainty as Emma herself radiated a cool displeasure and disdain. Emma could even detect a strong smell of – was it? – yes it was, it was the smell of roses. This was alarming. All her careful plans. There was no doubt in her mind that Master Elftyn was Harriet’s true love!

‘I had no notion that he liked me so very much,’ said Harriet, contemplating the letter in her hand.

‘I had no notion that you could be so ready to abandon all my... your... plans for the future on such a proposal. You never once said that you actually *favoured* this man.’

Harriet’s thoughts wrestled within her more strongly, and Emma ceased from trying to sense them; it was too exhausting. Could it be that there was some bewitchment in the letter? That would explain its unaccountable influence on her friend. She owed it to Harriet to speak a word of reason.

‘I lay it down as a general rule, Harriet, that if a woman doubts as to whether she should accept a man or not, she certainly ought to refuse him.’

Harriet turned her troubled eyes from her letter to her friend. Emma, seeing the look of turmoil, was indignant on Harriet’s behalf. How dare that young man upset all her careful plans in this way? Handsome Master Elftyn, accepted in all ranks of society, was perfect for Harriet, while plain, uncouth Robert Martin was little above a general farmer – how dare he aspire to her friend’s hand?

‘Marriage is not a state to be safely entered into with doubtful feelings, or with half a heart.’ she told Harriet. ‘I thought it my duty as a friend, and being older than yourself, to say this much to you. Recall your feelings this morning, in this very house, Harriet, when a certain gentleman took up your own portrait and carried it away as though it were a most precious object.’

Harriet’s cheeks flushed, and she looked more distressed than ever.

‘Compare the two young men, Harriet. See them standing side by side. One in his blue riding coat, the other in his brown broadcloth. Who has the advantage? Who has the look of a true gentleman? Who would make the most charming, considerate companion? Harriet, Harriet, do not deceive yourself; do not be run away with by gratitude and compassion.’ Emma refrained from using the word *beguilement* or *bewitchment* out loud; it would not do to cast such aspersions without proof. ‘At this moment, Harriet, who are you thinking of?’

Harriet’s confusion remained. She moved to stand by the fire, looking thoughtfully into the flames and twisting the letter in her hand.

Emma sensed the swirl of emotion around her friend. If Harriet were to choose Robert Martin, then Emma would have to accept defeat of all her plans. But it would be a bitterness indeed. She hated failure of every kind, and she would have to give Harriet up. She could not visit a Mistress

Harriet Martin of Mill Farm. No indeed! To see her dear, beautiful little Harriet amongst all those coarse-speaking farming persons, surrounded by cows and chickens and presiding over the dairy when she could be sat in the pretty little parlour of Master Elftyn's cottage, sitting amongst books and ornaments and presiding over tea – it was too horrible!

But Harriet was speaking. Her expression was not happy, and her words were halting.

'I have now quite determined, and really almost made up my mind,' began Harriet. She glanced again at the letter in hand then resolutely turned her eyes from it, 'To refuse Master Martin. Do you think I am right?'

What a relief!

'Perfectly, perfectly right, my dearest Harriet; you are doing just what you ought.'

Emma held out her hands to draw Harriet to her, breaking the coolness she had been emanating with a warm smile. 'Dear Harriet, it would have grieved me to lose your acquaintance, now I am secure of you forever. We will not be parted. A woman is not to marry a man merely because she is asked, or because he is attached to her and can write a tolerable letter.'

The danger was over. The letter of refusal must now be written and sent without delay. Emma reached for the bell to call for fresh ink.

HARRIET WAS STILL in low spirits that evening at Hartfield.

'I shall never be invited to Mill Farm again,' Harriet said at one point as she and Mistress Woodhouse sat together after dinner. 'I think Mother Goodword would be very much surprised if she knew what had happened,' she mused a little later as they attempted to play at cards to while away the time. 'I am sure Rue would also. I do not think Myrtle would think much about it, except to wonder that I should even care about such a thing.'

'But you do not want to be invited to Mill Farm, dear,' Emma countered gently. 'You are too busy here with me here, and our studies and plans. And you are busy at the school, doing whatever it is you do there. What do you do there?'

'We... work on Godmothering concerns.'

Emma did her best to steer Harriet's thoughts into the right current, reminding her of her attachment to herself and of all her future hopes of Master Elftyn. But it was a little tiring to be always counteracting every

regret and sorrowful remembrance, and it was something of a relief when Harriet went back to the school to her 'Godmothering concerns'.

NEXT MORNING, Emma helped her father ready himself for his walk. The weekly menu had been discussed with Serle, and there were no other housekeeping matters Emma needed to attend to. Hartfield ran smoothly. She prided herself on how well she kept everything in good order. She would not have her father perturbed by any change in routine or menu. All was regular, predictable, orderly. So why did such words cause a feeling something like heaviness to settle upon her? She had nothing to feel heavy about. She was mistress of a grand house. She was the lady of the manor. She was Lady Bountiful to Hartfield, so important a village with its situation on the border of Faerie. What was there to feel unhappy about? What more could she possibly wish for, except that the petty thief would be apprehended and everything return to as much order outside of Hartfield as it was within.

'What more could I possibly wish for?' she murmured to herself, and somehow, she could hardly say how, she found herself drawn to the table where the *Book of Proverbial Wisdom* sat, its gilt letters winking at her. 'It's only a book,' she said. 'You are only a book.' She defiantly opened it and let her finger fall randomly onto a line.

The heart is a deep well. Who can know its hidden depths?

'I do not think my heart is so very hidden in its depths. I know my own heart very well. It is full of my father and sister and my nephews and nieces, and dear Mistress Weston, and sweet Harriet, I know all that is in my heart. There is nothing hidden.'

She was about to close the book when the page before her turned itself as though by an invisible hand.

'Very well,' she said. 'I am not unused to the ways of Faerie, living within the influence of the Green Man. What is it you wish to tell me?' She dropped her eyes to the page where one proverb drew her eye.

A true friend's counsel is to be prized above gold.

'Certainly, it is. I do not argue with you there. And I hope I always prize the counsel of my true friends.' She felt a glint of triumph that she had not fallen short on *that* point.

There was the sound of a familiar voice in the hall beyond, and she closed the book and went to greet Master Knightley.

‘Have you come with news?’ she asked. She scanned his expression for any telltale sign of bad news. But he looked no worse than he had the previous day.

‘No further news as yet,’ he replied.

‘Then you will drink tea with us.’ She was pleased to have so enjoyable an occupation as sitting with Master Knightley; he always drove away any uncomfortable thoughts of hers with his bright, strong spirit, except, one uncomfortable thought struck her in that moment – ‘I hope you are not come to press Papa into action.’

‘No,’ said Master Knightley gravely. ‘I have given up all hope of that. Some other way must be sought, but what it is, I do not know.’

‘Papa is in the drawing room, considering whether it is too cold to walk out. Perhaps you can assure him it is not so wintry as he fears.’

Master Woodhouse sat in his chair wearing his fur-lined cap and a voluminous scarf wrapped about his throat.

‘I do not know if I should venture out just now,’ said Master Woodhouse after the usual greetings had been exchanged and tea had been drunk and general news had been shared and the topics of thieves and rogue magic and darklings had been avoided. ‘It looks very cold.’

‘It is but fresh, sir,’ Master Knightley assured him. ‘And dry. Not a hint of dampness. You will do very well to go now as Emma advises.’

‘And the sun has just come out, Papa,’ added Emma. ‘You had better go while the sun is out. You will feel pleasantly warm once you have gained the end of the shrubbery.’

‘You see, Master Knightley, that Emma advises me to go now while the sun is out. I hope you will not consider me doing a very rude thing by taking Emma’s advice to go out for a quarter of an hour while the sun is out.’

‘My dear sir, do not make a stranger of me,’ said Master Knightley. ‘I shall fetch your coat and open the garden door for you.’

Master Woodhouse left for his walk, and Emma expected that Master Knightley would also ready himself to leave, having said as much. But he resumed his seat near her and asked where Harriet was, so used was he to see Harriet whenever he called of late. ‘You are expecting her again, you say, this morning?’ he asked.

‘Almost every moment. She has been gone longer already than she intended.’

‘Something has happened to delay her; some visitors perhaps.’

‘Highbury gossips! Tiresome wretches!’ Emma imagined Harriet getting waylaid by the likes of Mistress Cole or Cox as she made her way down Highbury Broadway. They would be trying to extract some piece of gossip out of Harriet regarding the goings-on of Hartfield or herself. It was very irksome to always be the object of the lower classes’ interest.

‘Harriet may not consider everybody tiresome that you would,’ observed Master Knightley.

Emma knew this was too true for contradiction and therefore said nothing. He presently added with a smile, ‘I do not pretend to fix on times and places, but I must tell you that I have good reason to think your little friend will hear something to her advantage.’

‘Indeed! How So? Of what sort?’

‘A very serious sort, I assure you,’ still smiling.

‘Very serious! I can think of but one thing – who is in love with her? Who makes you their confident?’

It was surely Master Elftyn. Who else could it be? Master Elftyn looked up to Master Knightley and made him a general adviser. This was excellent news indeed, and just what her spirits required at this moment to drive out all the dreadful business of Robert Martin and his letter. Whatever this news was, it pleased Master Knightley, judging by his countenance.

But – what was this? What was Master Knightley saying? He was not talking of Master Elftyn and Harriet – he was speaking of that wretched Robert Martin and his plans to make a proposal to Harriet!

Things were out of order, indeed, if even Master Knightley thought Robert Martin proposing a good thing – they would be sure to quarrel over this!

ENIGMAS, CHARADES, CONUNDRUMS

Harriet raised the hood of her forgetfulness cloak and made her way to the place of assignation. The stile leading across Highbury Common was a good place to linger. If anyone were to come down the lane from either direction, she could pretend she was retying her shoe lace before climbing the stile; but hardly anyone did use the lane.

The lilac sylph was not to be seen; she would slumber the winter away in her tree, awaiting the touch of the springtime sun, thus Master Elftyn had no need to abuse any fairy as he made his way along the lane.

‘Have you got it?’ he asked. A terse greeting, Harriet thought, but she understood that likely he was tired from his long ride back from London the previous day.

She pulled out the document, sealed with fae beeswax. ‘I could not put a spell on the seal,’ she said apologetically, ‘I have not the magic for it, but there is some magic in the wax itself. When the seal is broken it will release the essence of the words within to the reader.’

‘And the essence is romantic?’ he queried, taking the note between gloved fingers. He sniffed the air above it. ‘The magic is weak,’ he said.

Harriet felt grieved that she had disappointed him. ‘When shall you give it?’ she asked, thinking she might help in another way. ‘If I know, then I could prepare the way a little.’

‘Pray do. I will time my movements carefully. I shall wait until the arrival of the portrait. Our mutual friend may have a day or two to consider my kindness in procuring it. Perhaps you may encourage such thoughts.’

‘To be sure I shall.’

‘Every assistance in my cause is welcome. Soon comes the grand finale.’ His eyes gleamed, and a satisfied smile curled his lips.

‘Grand finale?’ repeated Harriet.

‘The grand finale of the match,’ said Master Elftyn.

‘Oh, you mean the proposal!’ Harriet flushed with pleasure to think how wonderful it would be to have Master Elftyn on bended knee, offering his hand and heart to the woman he loved. Mistress Woodhouse could not resist such an offer, surely she could not. Or could she? A doubt niggled in Harriet’s mind. No matter how hard she tried to turn Mistress Woodhouse’s thoughts towards Master Elftyn, she always seemed to maintain a coolness towards the idea.

‘I hope you have success,’ said Harriet. ‘How I wish I could give you more powerful help. How I wish I were a real Fairy Godmother.’ She sighed.

‘I think I can manage by my own exertions, Sister Harriet,’ said Master Elftyn. His curl of a smile wavered into a sneer for a moment. Harriet blinked in surprise to see it, but then it vanished. She must have imagined it. But there was an odd smell in the air. What was it? Something was not right.

He slipped the paper beneath his cloak, granted her a nod of farewell and turned back toward his cottage, glancing about to see if anyone had observed them.

‘I wonder he did not even say thank you,’ Harriet said to herself, as she watched his departing figure, his winter cloak swirling about him as a little trail of the east wind picked up and rushed about, as though irritated. But Harriet was too wrapped up in her own muddled thoughts and feelings to listen to the wind, as she ought. Had she done so, she would have heard the warning. She shivered and only wished that her cloak was nicely lined with fur as Mistress Woodhouse’s was. Perhaps that was all that was wrong with her – she was simply cold and needed to get home.



THERE WAS a slight difficulty with the delivery of Harriet’s portrait; the courier sent to carry it to Hartfield had refused to enter the border of Highbury, claiming his horse was spooked by something uncanny in the air.

It was not the first time in recent weeks that delivery men and couriers had refused to enter the village boundary; animals were very susceptible to rogue magic, and would shy away from its presence as though a snake were in the road. News of the courier at the border soon flitted from sprite to gnome to mortal, and James, the Hartfield coachman, was despatched to retrieve the delivery.

The portrait was duly hung over the mantelpiece of the common sitting-room, and had been greatly admired by Master Elftyn, yet to Harriet's mind, his compliments had fallen on distracted ears, and he had gone away again in some disappointment. Mistress Woodhouse continued in her distracted spirits all that day, and the next. She would hear a sound and rush to the window to look out, only to turn away looking disappointed.

'Who are you expecting, Mistress Woodhouse?' Harriet asked on the fourth occasion of this happening that morning.

'Oh, no one in particular. I thought Master Knightley might call as usual, for we have not seen him these two days.'

'Is he away from home?'

'No. But he is not pleased with me. We had a disagreement and did not part on friendly terms.'

Harriet was bent over her riddle book, pasting in flowers. 'I am sorry to hear it,' she said. 'Shall we attend to my book now? I have one that I think you will like.'

Mistress Woodhouse seemed not to hear her friend; she was still looking out of the window in expectation. 'It was but a little thing,' she said. 'Nothing of consequence. Master Knightley had a ridiculous notion in his head about one of his tenants getting married and we quite disagreed over it.'

'Tenants?' Harriet looked up. 'Married? Which one?' Her thoughts flew to the Martins.

Mistress Woodhouse did not answer, but only smiled a little too brightly and said, 'Let me look at your page, Harriet. How do you get on? Are those moss violets pasted around your riddle? They are excellent for stirring up love, are they not? See, I do remember what we studied last week about love languages.'

'Do smell them,' urged Harriet, 'they have the prettiest scent'

Emma drew near and bent over the page, but there came a sound from outside, as someone's step crunched on the walkway, and she flew back to

the window.

‘Is it Master Knightley?’ Harriet asked.

‘No. It is only Master Elftyn.’ The disappointment was evident, but it quickly passed. ‘He is looking very spruce. Quite as though he were dressed to go courting.’ Emma gave Harriet a knowing smile.

Master Elftyn was shown in, and bows and greetings followed. ‘I regret I cannot stay,’ he replied to Emma’s offer of tea. ‘I am on my way to a meeting regarding the assistance of the poor.’

‘What a very worthy cause,’ said Emma. ‘Harriet was only this morning talking of the poor, were you not, Harriet?’

‘How charitable,’ said Master Elftyn, ‘perfectly commendable.’ His gaze barely flickered over Harriet, before returning to the fair mistress of the mansion. ‘I came, Mistress Woodhouse, only to bring this on my way to my meeting.’ He placed a folded letter on the little side table between them. ‘It is a charade,’ he said, with a peculiar degree of consciousness. ‘You requested one of me quite recently, if you recollect?’

‘Oh, indeed. For Harriet’s book.’

‘I do not offer it for the collection,’ said he. ‘I have no right to expose it to any degree to the public eye, but perhaps you may not dislike looking at it.’

And he was gone the next moment, with a bow and a last lingering look.

Emma took up the charade and promptly handed it to Harriet. ‘I believe this is certainly for you, my dear. Open it!’

‘No indeed, Mistress Woodhouse!’ Harriet recoiled from the letter. It must be Mistress Woodhouse who broke the seal that the words of love would move her to think of her true love.

‘Do not be fearful of it,’ Emma chided. ‘It is but a charade.’

‘Oh, Mistress Woodhouse, how can you say so? When we have been studying rhymes for so long now. Words are never just words. Pray, do open it yourself, for it was put into your hand.’

‘Very well,’ said Emma, breaking the seal and casting her quick eye over its contents, then passing it to Harriet, with a smile.

Harriet blushed with the shame of reading her own words, but reminded herself that it was all in the name of matchmaking, and she must not betray herself. ‘Is it well written?’ she asked tentatively.

‘I have read worse.’

‘What can it be?’ Harriet’s cheeks glowed and her voice quivered at her own daring in this venture.

‘My dear Harriet, you cannot find much difficulty in comprehending. Read it again.’

Harriet made a pretence of reading it again and threw a baffled look at Mistress Woodhouse. ‘The first line talks of lords and kings. Is it kingdom?’

‘Court, Harriet. The answer to the first line is *court*. Now answer the second line.’

Harriet feigned confusion. ‘*The monarch of the seas*,’ she read. ‘It must be Neptune. Or a mermaid. Or a shark!’

‘Nonsense! My dear Harriet, what are you thinking of? Where would be the use of his bringing us a charade about a mermaid? The answer is *ship*, Harriet. The monarch of the sea is a ship. Now put the two answers together.’

Harriet hesitated. It was not for her to speak the answer aloud; Mistress Woodhouse must say the word. The connection must all be in her mind that it might reach her heart. That was how the love-riddle worked. She would understand its meaning and immediately think of her true love.

‘Ship and court,’ Harriet murmured. ‘Oh, Mistress Woodhouse, it is too clever a riddle, shall we ever know the answer?’

‘It speaks of courtship, Harriet. Do you not see? *Court* and *ship* – courtship!’

‘Oh, so it does! How clever of you to understand it so readily. Why, it likely took the writer hours and days and weeks to think of it, and you have discerned it in a moment.’

‘It is not that clever a riddle.’

‘Is it not? Do you not think it is the best charade you have ever read?’

‘I have never read one more to the purpose, certainly. Therein lies all its merit.’ A quiet smile crossed Emma’s face. ‘I wish Master Knightley were here to read it,’ she said, more to herself than to Harriet. ‘He would see that I was right, and better things have been put in writing than a blunt proposal.’

Her words were too soft for Harriet to catch them clearly. Harriet held out the paper. ‘It certainly is for you, Mistress Woodhouse. He wished it to be for your eyes.’

‘Nonsense, Harriet.’ Mistress Woodhouse pushed Harriet’s fingers away.

Harriet felt confused. Why did Mistress Woodhouse seem wholly unaffected by the romantic riddle? It must be that it was a bad one. It was another sign of her failure as a Godmother. She let it drop to her lap and looked grave.

‘My dear Harriet, you must not refine too much upon this. You will betray your feelings improperly if you appear to be overpowered by such a little tribute of admiration. Don’t let us be too solemn about the business. He has encouragement enough to proceed, without our sighing out our souls over this charade.’

‘Oh, no – I hope I shall not be ridiculous about it. Do as you please.’ Harriet stifled another sigh and resigned herself to her failure. She would have to think of some new way to assist Master Elftyn.

THE FOGS OF DECEMBER

Despite the time Harriet spent at Hartfield, she still found she had too much time on her hands now she had no classes to teach. Carrying out household tasks about the school was Harriet's best measure against thinking about Robert Martin and his extraordinary letter. She could not afford to be robbed of concentration at a time when she most needed it.

She ought to think of nothing save her matchmaking assignment. And, even more importantly, finding a clue as to the whereabouts of the wand.

She doubted it would be her who would find the clue, for Myrtle and Rue were so much cleverer than herself. They were both out searching even now.

She'd spent two hours walking about the village, putting the hood of her forgetfulness cloak up and down as she asked questions and looked out for signs, but it had been another fruitless morning. Mistress Woodhouse was spending the morning with Mistress Weston, so Harriet must now occupy herself. She wandered about the empty rooms of the school, looking for something to do, vaguely aware of Cloe-Claws padding behind her.

Why had Robert Martin proposed? That was the question that shadowed her, like a watchful cat. He knew she wished to be a Godmother. Had she not said so many times over the summer? She tried to remember any conversations they may have had on the subject. It was odd, but now that she considered it, she could not remember ever having really talked about it. It was as though the idea had gone from her mind all through the summer. Why was that? Perhaps she had simply been too occupied with her friends.

What delightful walks and picnics they had all had, down by the riverbank, paddling in the shallow places in the water. He'd tried to teach her and May to fish. How she'd squealed when she caught a tiny little fish, and how he'd laughed, and made her laugh too. And the evenings of cards and more laughter, and then the dancing and music and singing at Midsummer.

But it was no good to think of such things. She could never leave Mother Goodword and the children at the school. She was in the dining room now, and it saddened her to see the long refectory tables stretching away empty, the chairs standing useless. She caught Cloe-Claws watching her through narrowed eyes, as though she knew her thoughts. 'I could never leave you all,' she told the cat. 'But why did he have to write such a letter?' He had quite ruined her peace. 'I'll polish the tables,' she decided.

There was something soothing in the quiet repetitive acts of cleaning and polishing. Harriet was not so ignorant as to carry out any work the brownie had taken on as her own. So, she announced loudly, for the benefit of Busie, that she was just going to carry out some maintenance to the woodwork in the dining room. Maintenance work and cleaning one's own bedroom was permitted by Busie; the rest of the household work was not. Mother Goodword had always been very firm with the students on how to behave when there was a brownie in the house. Having a loyal brownie was a blessing; offending one brought very unpleasant consequences to one's household comforts.

Harriet first searched the cupboards and shelves in the storeroom for the orange oil she wanted. The little stone-built room with its low rafters looked sadly depleted. There were few herbs and plants gathered in winter; spring would begin replenishing their pitiful stock. Strange that they should have used so much of it in so short a time. In fact, as Harriet looked at each shelf, each cubbyhole, and the empty hooks in the beams where bunches of herbs should hang, she wondered which of the Sisters had used everything up. She could not recall Rue or Myrtle saying they were making a big batch of anything. Perhaps Mistress Perry had borrowed it, her own stock affected by the mischief in the village of late. There was no purple-spotted orchid root left, no cow-parsley or chickweed powder. The last bottle of dawn dew was almost empty. There was a jar of orange oil, however, so she took it up and returned to the dining hall and began her work.

A rap at the school door sounded, its sound echoing down the hall, and a 'Coo-ee! Anyone home?' was repeated as quick, light footsteps came down the hallway.

'In the dining hall, Mistress Perry!' called out Harriet, continuing her polishing.

'How quiet it is,' exclaimed Mistress Perry, coming in, her bright elven eyes looking round. 'It's not natural. Such a pity. I hope Mother Goodword returns soon. Any news?'

Harriet chatted a while with Mistress Perry, glad for the distraction. They wondered between them where Mother Goodword could be, and when she might come back. The talk moved from Mother Goodword to Mistress Woodhouse.

'I hear a rumour that you have been sitting for a portrait,' said Mistress Perry.

'It is true,' admitted Harriet.

'How very aristocratic. I wonder that you have time to sit for hours, I should have thought you had much to do with your studies.'

'It was connected to my studies. Indirectly.'

'Did you feel like a fine lady, having your likeness taken?'

Harriet paused in her polishing to recall those hours. 'Time passes so slowly when one is only to sit. I had a constant itch or tickle about me the whole time. Master Elftyn was very kind in reading to us to while away the time.'

'Was he now? How interesting. Well, I did hear another rumour...' Mistress Perry said the word *rumour* as though it were some kind of delicious sweet. 'I heard that Master Elftyn was commissioned to take the portrait to the framers. All the way to town, is that true?'

'It is. He is very obliging,' said Harriet warmly.

'Ah, that solves a little riddle. My husband met Master Elftyn on the road the other day. He was coming home from Clayton Park and was amazed to find that Master Elftyn was riding all the way to London and did not mean to return till the next day. He said he was on a *very enviable commission*. My husband said he looked as the cat who has had the cream. He was so bold as to say directly to Master Elftyn that he was sure that there must be a *lady* in the case, and what do you think Master Elftyn did?'

'What did he do?'

'He smiled and rode on.'

‘Oh.’ Harriet had been expecting a better ending to the story.

‘What a lucky woman to have captured the heart of Master Elftyn,’ said Mistress Perry. ‘For this *enviable commission* was surely in the service of a certain fair lady of the manor and her painting, was it not?’

‘To be sure,’ agreed Harriet, pleased to think her matchmaking must be working to some degree if the neighbours were noticing it. It was only a great pity that Mistress Woodhouse herself seemed resistant.

‘Any woman that Master Elftyn could prefer I must think the luckiest woman in the world, for, beyond a doubt, Master Elftyn has not his equal for beauty and agreeableness,’ continued Mistress Perry.

‘Oh, indeed. He is very handsome and gentlemanlike and agreeable.’ It was always a pleasure to praise Master Elftyn.

‘And he has an air of confidence,’ said Mistress Perry. ‘It would suit him very well to be raised up. To become a leader in society. We need a good leader in these times, do we not? We need someone with authority at the helm.’

Harriet was not quite sure what Mistress Perry meant by this. ‘He does have a good air of confidence,’ she agreed. She paused to tip fresh oil onto her polishing rag. ‘But he has not the air of authority that Master Knightley has.’ Her conscience pricked her a little as she recalled that she had displaced Master Knightley as her ward for handsome Master Elftyn.

‘You may be right,’ said Mistress Perry. ‘But I think that will come with age. He’s a young man, and will improve in time. As you say, he has not the confidence of Master Knightley. And he has not that delightful smell of pine about him that Mistress Martin’s son has.’

Being elven, Mistress Perry was just as susceptible to scent as the Sisters were, though hers came with no need for practise.

‘Master Martin!’ exclaimed Harriet, dropping her cloth. ‘Why do you speak of *him*? How can you speak of him as though comparing him to Master Elftyn and Master Knightley!’

‘To be sure, he has no beauty in his features comparable to Master Elftyn,’ said Mistress Perry, ‘but his soul smells very pleasant. But you would know that. You spent the whole of the summer with the Martins, did you not?’

‘Why, yes.’ Harriet picked up her cloth and vigorously resumed her work. Was Mistress Perry fishing for gossip regarding Robert Martin’s proposal of marriage? Had she heard a rumour of it? Harriet did not mind

encouraging rumours of Master Elftyn and Mistress Woodhouse, but she did not want any regarding herself and Robert Martin.

‘Robert Martin’s manners cannot be compared to Master Elftyn’s,’ was Harriet’s summing up of the matter. ‘I don’t think Robert Martin ever wrote a riddle or spoke a line of poetry in his life, but Master Elftyn knows so many poems and is always quoting clever things and I should think he would write very long, clever letters, if he were to write to a lady, and not short ones that were easy to understand.’

‘Very long letters?’

‘I am only guessing.’ Harriet flushed deeply and polished so hard that her fair curls bounced with the movement.

Mistress Perry did not seem to notice Harriet’s distress. She continued on the subject of Master Elftyn’s praiseworthy qualities. ‘How well he has done his house up since he came to Highbury. One would think he has done it up purposely to prepare it for a wife. Those pretty curtains at the front, what a happy colour. They exactly match the primroses in spring.’

A sudden thought struck Harriet that made her cease polishing for a minute.

‘Mistress Perry, if you lived in a very grand house, and had done so all your life, would you think it difficult to move into a little cottage?’

‘Why would one wish to move into a little cottage if one had a grand house?’

‘Perhaps you had fallen in love with a very agreeable man, but he only had a little cottage.’

‘If I were very much richer than my husband, I would bring a fortune to him that would enable him to build a bigger house.’

‘Of course!’ said Harriet, her frown replaced with a smile of relief. ‘Why did I not think of that? They will build a handsome house.’

‘Who will?’

But Harriet did not answer. She peered into her jar of oil, trying to see if there were any left in the bottom. Goodness, how much she had used!

‘Are you out of orange oil?’

‘We’re out of everything,’ said Harriet, thinking of the sparse shelves of the storeroom. ‘Mistress Perry, did you borrow a goodly amount from our storeroom in the past week?’

‘I borrowed a sprig or two of tansy some time ago.’

‘Is that all? You have not borrowed any purple-spotted orchid root? No cow-parsley or chickweed powder?’

‘No indeed. What need have I for love powders?’

‘Love powders?’

‘Purple-spotted orchid root, cow parsley and chickweed are the base ingredients of a love powder. Along with dawn dew, and honey to bind them, it must be fae honey, and chamomile-leaf, and something else... now what is it?’

‘Could it be... speedwell?’ said Harriet.

‘Very good! You *are* coming along well in your studies. Those little rumours regarding your acolyte name must be mistaken. Speedwell. Excellent for a speedy recovery from winter colds, the tickly cough, the rheumy eye, and an essential ingredient in a strong love powder. Though I did not think Mother Goodword approved of love powders and potions.’

‘She doesn’t,’ said Harriet distractedly. Her mind was flitting over many thoughts and ideas at that moment.

‘Well, you can’t do any harm with a love powder at present,’ said Mistress Cole, adjusting her bonnet in preparation to leave. ‘For you have no magic to activate it, have you?’

Harriet stared at her.

‘It was a pleasure talking with you, Sister Harriet. I don’t have any orange oil I can lend you, but I do have some lemon. I’ll send my boy over with it.’

‘Wait,’ she said, as Mistress Cole neared the door. ‘What was it you came for?’

‘I just wanted to hear if there was any news,’ said Mistress Cole. ‘I’ve come from sitting with Dame Baytes, and she was asking after Mother Goodword, so I said I would come and enquire if there’s any word.’

‘Oh. I see.’

‘I wish she would return and put things right in Highbury, that is what I said to Dame Baytes, it’s a bad day, is it not, when mischief runs amok among us and our own Wild Man will not stir from his armchair. Folks are saying it’s a shame and an injustice, but I say there’s good hope for a welcome change coming in that quarter. Did we not have two great Winds these past months? Winds bring change, do they not? Change is coming. Spring shall drive out winter, the old harvest shall make way for the new. That’s the way of things. Good day to you!’

A TROUBLESOME CREATURE

Midwinter came, and the village lingered on in dissatisfaction. There was no gingerbread smell wafting from Mistress Wallis's bakery that Midwinter; the cinnamon rolls and gingerbread would keep coming out burnt, so Mistress Wallis gave up making them. There were still odd accounts of mischief shared over tea in parlours and ale in the Crown Inn: tales of scarecrows coming to life and wandering about the fields, scaring more than just the crows; sightings of all kinds of unearthly creatures near the riverbank, so that no one would dare fish there. There were grumblings against Mother Goodword and Master Woodhouse. What was the point of having the Wild Man, and a Godmother amongst them when things were left to go on as they were? It was a disgrace. Their children terrified by enchanted scarecrows and not a single gingerbread star to be had on Midwinter eve. Not to mention the deplorable lack of fresh milk now that the cows were all so skittish.

'Perhaps,' good Master Elftyn was heard to say over his mug of mead in the Crown, 'we need a new Guardian at Hartfield. One who would exert his authority and put a stop to all this nonsense.'

His fellow partakers of mead and ale nodded over their pipe bowls and mugs. Perhaps Master Elftyn ought to marry the daughter, and take over at Hartfield, was the consensus, to which Master Elftyn modestly laughed.

'Perhaps,' Master Elftyn was heard to say over his cup of tea as he sat in ladies' parlours, discussing all things genteel, 'we need a new Wild Man at Hartfield. One who would take up his responsibility and make safe our borders.'

The good wives and daughters of Highbury nodded over their saucers and wished heartily that it were so. Those who had no marriageable daughters hinted that perhaps Master Elftyn should seek the hand of the Lady of the Manor, that he might step into the shoes of Guardian himself. Master Elftyn laughed charmingly at such an idea.

So, it came to pass that all of Highbury reached the general opinion that good Master Elftyn would soon wed Mistress Woodhouse, and save the village; after all, it was well known that he visited the manor frequently. Was he not always mentioning something Master Woodhouse or Mistress Woodhouse had said or done recently? Tea, supper, evening cards, he was always there. It was even said that he rode all the way to town just to carry out an errand for her. Some business at the framers. Now that was not the act of a mere kindly neighbour – that was the act of a lover!

Speculation became fact, suggestion became certainty, whispers became open talk. Everyone, saving the lady in question herself was quite convinced of it, and there was even talk that one of the young Godmothers at the school was assisting him with magic. It was about time something useful was done by the residents of *that* establishment.



MYRTLE WAS FEELING HOPEFUL. She had set out to check the site of the old bridge, to see if there were any signs of darklings crossing over, but before she reached the turning to Donwell Road, she picked up the smell of a trail of magic leading westwards, and it was most definitely rogue magic. She followed the hedgerows overarching the lane between Highbury and the road to Kingston. The magic came as a twist in the air, as though a sylph had somersaulted through her head, giving her a momentary feeling of tumbling. An ordinary mortal would have exclaimed in that moment that they'd had a funny turn, a sudden feeling of dizziness that passed as quickly as it had come. But Myrtle knew what a sylph felt like, and she knew she was not having a funny turn. Something had recently passed by this way and left a trace of strange magic roiling behind it in its wake.

It was easier to close her eyes and apply all her sensing to track the magic. She could only walk a few steps at a time in this fashion, or she risked stepping in a rut in the lane and turning an ankle, or being tricked

into walking into the brambles by the tiny bramble imps, who lived in burrows beneath.

So, she made slow progress, but certainty rose with every yard she gained, for the roiling magic grew a little stronger in feel and smell the closer she drew towards it. She was in Gypsy Woods now, an ancient woodland of hornbeam and elm and box, dense and dark, despite the elms and hornbeams being leafless in their wintry rest.

Eventually she had no need to close her eyes, for she could sense the magic more readily. It crossed her mind that she might be entering into danger. Perhaps she ought to turn back and seek assistance, but assistance from whom? Rue would urge her onwards, not heeding any danger in her excitement; Harriet would be of no help, she was too frightened of imps to venture into Gypsy Wood, and there was no one she could ask magical aid from. So, she continued on alone, glad that she was naturally light-footed, and could move carefully and quietly. Rue would have crashed through the undergrowth, treading on sticks and tripping over roots, alerting her presence to every imp and mischievous sprite.

Myrtle had her little knife she always carried in her pocket, and she had her knitting needle, which doubled very well as hair pin and weapon, if required.

There was a break between the trees, and she spied a wreath of wood smoke. Someone had set up camp.

The smoke came from a small ring of stones, harbouring a fire, and over the fire, squatted down, stirring a small cauldron was a stranger.

Myrtle stood behind a hornbeam trunk and peered at him. At first glance she had seen a thin creature, with limbs like crooked branches. But that first impression shifted into a different view when she looked again. The man, or whatever he was, clearly wore a glamour. Behind him lay objects spread on the ground, as though he had carried a big pack of goods, that were now tipped out to be rummaged through. *A roamer*, thought Myrtle. *A roamer would be exactly the sort of person to steal a wand.*

‘Well, lookee here,’ said the roamer, not looking up, but remaining squatted over the fire. ‘Company.’

Myrtle hesitated, but she had come this far. There was no use running away now.

‘Good day to you,’ she said, stepping out from behind the tree, and approaching as close as she dared.

‘What can I do ye for?’ said the roamer. He tilted his head and grinned up at her. He was surprisingly handsome. Myrtle’s first impression had been that of an ugly face with crooked teeth and dirty straggly beard, but this was a youthful man, clean-shaven with tolerably good teeth. But she was not so unwise as to forget her first impression.

‘Have you wares?’ she asked in a business-like tone, thinking he might offer a wand.

‘Wares, snares, tares, and bears, have I,’ said the roamer with a wink. ‘The only thing I don’t carry is *cares*.’

‘Bears?’ said Myrtle, glancing about.

‘Grease from the ferocious werebear. Nothing like it for candles to burn ten times as long as tallow. But you’ll not be wanting bear-grease, I’ll warrant. Fine lady as yourself will be wanting something pleasant. Fae spider lace for your gowns? Unicorn horn for your hair rinse? Ground mermaid’s pearls for your tooth powder?’

‘Do I look like a coquette?’ said Myrtle. ‘What have you got that’s useful?’

‘Useful? For what purpose, O dark-haired damsel? For the purpose of catching a husband?’ He winked again. ‘For a curse to fell a foe? A charm to rise to the pinnacle of your profession, dwarvish tin to glamour into gold?’

‘I said useful.’

The roamer feigned a look of hurt. ‘Those are me best lines. So, what *do* ye want?’

It was then that Myrtle noticed a shadowy form moving from under a bramble bush. It was some kind of dog-like creature, though not any dog she had seen before. Its eyes were red as garnets. And now that it was inching towards the fire pit, she saw that it had scales, not fur. It was no dog; it was a—

‘*Dragon?*’ breathed Myrtle in wonder.

‘Get back,’ the roamer growled at the creature. ‘Ye shall get your breakfast when I say so. It’s over fond of rabbit,’ the roamer said. ‘Greedy little beast.’

The dragon made a noise like a bark, and a soft red puff escaped from between his teeth.

‘It’s very small,’ said Myrtle. ‘A young one?’

‘Young enough,’ said the roamer. He tugged on a chain at his side and the dragon gave a piercing cry and slunk back into the shadow of the bush.

‘You’ve got him bound,’ said Myrtle, looking at the fine, fae-metal chain about the dragon’s neck.

‘Course I have. Would ye wish for a dragon to be flying over your duck ponds and sheep pens? Am I not a responsible roamer?’ He spooned a taste of something from his cooking pot and smacked his lips. ‘Mortal game is so bland,’ he said mournfully, then reached into a tin beside him and took a handful of dried leaves in all colours, throwing them into the pot. ‘One has to add an unearthly amount of seasoning. Now what was it ye were wanting? Something useful, ye said.’

‘It looks thin.’ Myrtle could not take her eyes off the dragon. She moved nearer the creature, and it crawled towards her, but the roamer gave a yank on the chain, causing the dragon to retreat, crying out again, with a puff of red smoke.

‘Get away from it, maid. ’Tis a vicious creature. I’ll not be responsible for ye getting that pretty black hair singed from your scalp.’

‘Stop yanking that chain,’ Myrtle said, her eyes blazing with indignation. ‘You’re hurting it. What kind of chain is it, that it should cause him so much pain?’

‘The kind of chain that keeps a dragon in check,’ replied the roamer. ‘Do ye want your woodlands burned down? Your thatched barns yonder ablaze? Am I not a responsible roamer?’

‘It looks too small do such damage.’ She peered harder at it, trying to discern its shape. ‘Is it a whelp? Does it have any flame?’

The dragon’s eyes glowed from beneath the shadow of the bramble bush. They met Myrtle’s and in that meeting of eyes, something pierced Myrtle’s heart so sharply that she caught her breath. It wasn’t a physical pain, but some strange response, as though in the moment of meeting, there was an anchor of bond placed between them. She had felt nothing like it before, and did not understand what it meant. But she had to rescue it. She had to rescue *him*, and take him back to where he belonged.

‘Where’s his mother?’ she demanded.

The roamer shrugged. ‘What am I, an all-seeing sorcerer or an all-knowing Wisewoman? I’m just a humble trader, me. A responsible roamer, am I not?’

Myrtle had already cast her eyes round at the roamer's scattered belongings. He was a responsible roamer all right – responsible for the mystery of Dame Hobbler's washing going missing from her line, judging by the jumble of linen shirts and woollen socks she saw in one bundle. And responsible for the sudden disappearance of all Farmer Mitchell's prize pheasants, judging by the brace of birds hanging from a branch.

'So, what did ye come for, pretty maid?' He tasted his stew again, smacking his lips as he gauged the flavour. 'What I'd give for salt from the mermaid lagoon,' he sighed.

'Have you any magic?' Myrtle still watched the dragon, but roused herself to remember what she was there for. 'Such as... a wand?'

'A wand?' He laughed and shook his head and resumed stirring his pot, chuckling to himself.

'Why do you laugh?'

'If I had a magic wand, would I be camping out amongst imps? If I had a magic wand, wouldn't I be sleeping in some fine bed and dining on roast beef instead of a skinny rabbit?'

Myrtle's hope sank. It was true. Why would he be here, not three miles from Highbury, if he'd had the use of a wand all this time?

'I could sell ye magic to *find* a wand, if there was one to be found,' said the roamer, stirring his pot carefully.

'I don't think I care for your kind of magic.' Myrtle recalled all the tales of mishaps and disasters that came about from purchasing something from a roamer.

'Perhaps I may have a finding charm. One that can find fae objects, even if they've been be-spelled to stay hidden.'

'Only royal magic can do that.'

The roamer lifted his eyes from his pot and narrowed them. 'You know a good deal about magic. I daresay you know that royal magic is dear. Very dear indeed. How could a plain, humble roamer as myself have such a treasure to hand?'

'Probably from trading dragons and other creatures to those who would use them in their own dark magic,' Myrtle said evenly.

His eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed again, as though he were regarding her in a new light.

'You would also be a wanted roamer, wanted by the royal court if you were carrying royal magic procured through transactions with anti-royalist

darklings.'

He only smiled, but it was a careful smile. 'Ye suppose a good deal, little raven-haired maid with eyes that be too blue to be mortal. Ye should take care that your imaginings don't land ye in trouble.'

'I think you are the one who needs to take care not to land in trouble,' countered Myrtle.

'I may have some charms.' He sprang to his feet and tugged out a large leathern pack from the mound behind him. He rummaged through the pack and pulled out some ghastly looking things, like black beetles on a string.

'No, indeed!' said Myrtle. She stepped back, holding her nose.

The roamer grinned. 'So, ye don't care for witches' charms, hey?'

'I want nothing from you,' said Myrtle, stepping further away. He clearly didn't have the wand, and she was not going to remain breathing in his noxious presence any longer. But a shift from the patch of brambles drew her eye back to the creature huddling beneath it. She could see the glow of his eyes as it watched her, and she could sense its misery even without trying. She stared at it, trying to make sense of the strange emotions the creature was rousing up in her.

'But I'll take the dragon.' She rummaged in her pocket. Her uncle gave her a gold sovereign at the start of each term when she left his large and lonely mansion to return to the school. 'A real sovereign. Not fairy gold.'

He snorted. 'Say ten gold sovereigns, little raven, and ye might be closer to the mark.'

'It's not a purchase. It's the recovery of stolen goods. My patroness is the Green Lady, and I have a duty to recover a living thing stolen out of Faerie.'

Myrtle was making this up as she went, but the roamer looked uneasy at the mention of the Green Lady.

'This is merely a goodwill offering,' Myrtle said, holding up the coin. 'Take it, and I'll desist from reporting you to the Wild Man and the Knight of the Well.'

The roamer flinched at those names. But he soon rallied. 'I hear word that the Wild Man of Hartfield has lost his wildness, and the Knight of the Well has turned farmer and is knightly no more.' He grinned, but she sensed a flicker of fear behind the smile.

'The Wild Man is still in communion with the Green Man,' replied Myrtle. 'And if the Knight of the Well has not been tried for some time, it

does not signify that he has lost his strength. His sword still hangs in its place. Lightbringer has not lost its edge through the short passage of mortal time.'

'Don't speak that name,' said the roamer, putting up a hand as though to ward off the image of Lightbringer, the famous sword of old.

'Just give me the dragon, and I'll leave you to make your own way out of the county.' A thought came to her. 'How did you get here?' she asked. 'The border is closed.'

'Perhaps your Wild Man and your knightly sword-bearer ain't been taking good care of the borders.'

'I won't let you walk away from here dragging that creature on your vile chain without alerting them.'

The roamer laughed. 'Do ye know how many gold sovereigns the northern dukes would pay for a young dragon? Why, they'd be falling over themselves to outbid one another.'

'Only so they can raise him up for sport,' said Myrtle coldly. 'I won't have it. You hand him over or face the Green Man and Green Lady.'

'Don't ye fear my curses, little raven?' he leered. His glamour had been slipping away as his fear and anger rose. Gone was the look of a handsome youth, now his features sharpened and twisted, but he still looked young. He was an inexperienced roamer, Myrtle thought. That was of some advantage to her.

'It is you who should fear me,' said Myrtle, summoning up a confidence she only partly felt. But she was not leaving without the dragon. There was something connecting her to that creature, and she was not leaving it behind.

She drew herself up tall, lifted her chin, and gave the roamer her best glare.

From childhood she had known the feeling of light, fierce and bright, gathering behind her eyes when she was roused by strong feeling. She had not understood why people looked back in fascination, or away in fear, when she looked at them with the feeling of this odd light. It had disturbed her as a child, and she had soon learnt to keep her emotions under control that she might not feel the sensation rising.

As she grew older, she found she could control the level of power. She could give a mild glare, enough to make troublesome schoolgirls obey her

without question, or she could make a stronger one, the one that Rue called her Faerie-queen glare; the one her uncle had called unnatural.

Now she was allowing all her anger at the roamer's cruel capture of the dragon to rise into a magnificent glare, such as she had not allowed herself to display in many years. The roamer was not immune to it. He started back at her.

'What are ye?' he growled, fear passing across his features. He took out a small key and unlocked the end of the chain from a padlock on a tree trunk. 'Ye shall regret this, ye little witch,' he warned, holding up the end of the chain. Myrtle drew near to take it. 'The gold,' he muttered. 'Let me see it.'

She held out the sovereign.

'Move it closer to the creature,' said the roamer.

The request was odd, but she did as he said, moving nearer to the creature huddled on the ground. It crept towards her; the chain holding it back only inches from Myrtle's hand. To Myrtle's astonishment, the creature's head, on its long neck, changed from dark, stormy blue to a shade of gold. The roamer yanked the chain back, and the creature yelped and hissed red puffs, and his head returned to the colour of storm clouds.

'Give it,' said the roamer, nodding at the sovereign. The transaction was made and Myrtle took hold of the chain.

Before turning away, she bent down, pulled her knife from her pocket, stabbed it into the cooking pot to bring up the stewing rabbit. She tossed it through the air to the little dragon, who leaped at it with a squeal and gobbled it up in a flash.

'Oy! That's my dinner!' yelled the roamer, rushing to his pot to see if ought was left. 'What did ye do that for!'

'Two reasons,' called Myrtle over her shoulder as she stalked away. 'First, the thing is half-starved, and second, for calling me a *witch*!'

FORETELLING AND GUESSING

‘**W**hat do you think of these, Emma?’

Mistress Weston held up a pair of linen table napkins.

‘The cream,’ said Emma decidedly. ‘What do you think, Harriet?’

Harriet looked between the napkins. One was a light shade of cream, and the other was a light shade of... cream. ‘Um...’ said Harriet, glancing between them.

‘Ivory or cream?’ Mistress Weston prompted.

‘Oh, to be sure, the cream,’ said Harriet, pointing at one napkin.

‘That’s the ivory, Harriet,’ said Emma with a smile.

‘Do you think the napkin colour will clash with the candles?’ Mistress Weston fretted.

Harriet looked at the orderly rows of new candles, lining the length of the table in their silver candelabras. The candles were a soft shade of... cream.

‘No, indeed,’ Emma assured her friend. ‘The candles are but half a shade darker.’

‘I do so want it to be *perfect*,’ said Mistress Weston.

‘And so it will,’ said Emma. ‘Your first Yuletide feast in your new home will be absolutely perfect.’

Mistress Weston lifted a glass and held it up to the light at the window. ‘I must ask Hannah to polish these again,’ she murmured. ‘She seems rather distracted of late. I’m sure I asked her once already today.’

Emma recalled the conversation she’d had some time ago with Mistress Baytes on the subject of Hannah Hazeldene. She had never repeated it to Mistress Weston, finding such general gossip vulgar. Had it been an account

of some young lady of consequence seen in a compromising scene with a young man, she might have taken an interest in the matter; but a housemaid and a steward's son held none of her notice.

'She's so preoccupied,' Mistress Weston continued, frowning at the glass, 'that I wonder if she has not a sweetheart to occupy her thoughts. She gets a dreamlike look in her eye as though she is some maiden in a romance. I was assured when I hired her that she was a sensible girl.'

'I'm sure she is,' said Emma. 'I did hear something regarding her and the son of Master Knightley's steward, which may explain your suspicions.'

'Did you indeed!' Mistress Weston put the glass down to examine Emma instead. 'I wish you had said sooner. It explains a good deal.'

'It was only gossip,' said Emma. 'I did not think it worth repeating.'

'I thought Mistress Larkin had her heart set on her son marrying the eldest Martin girl,' said Mistress Weston.

Harriet felt the usual lurch in her stomach to hear the name of *Martin* mentioned.

'You are familiar with the Martin family, are you not?' Mistress Weston asked Harriet. 'Is there to be a match between the eldest girl and the Larkins boy? He's a handsome young man, and if he's as hardworking and honest as his father, he would make a good match for any young lady of his class.'

'I don't believe Elizabeth Martin has any desire for matrimony at present,' Harriet said quietly, remembering with a pang that while Elizabeth had no wish to marry anyone, her brother Robert Martin did. Or had. Likely he had already forgotten all about Harriet after receiving her letter of refusal.

'Enough of other people's desires at present,' said Emma brightly, dispelling all dangerous talk of Robert Martin. 'We have enough to think of in arranging our own. How much we are all looking forward to tomorrow evening.'

'How glad I am that your father is coming to give the blessing of the Green Man's bounty,' said Mistress Weston, lifting the next wineglass to the window. 'I feel sure once our home has received the blessing, we will be absolutely safe, and then *he* may come.'

'Safe?' said Harriet, her curiosity piqued. 'And who is it that may come?'

'Why, Harriet,' exclaimed Emma, 'have you not heard of young Master Weston?'

‘Master Charmall,’ corrected Mistress Weston. ‘Frank had to take his aunt’s name. He is Master Frank Charmall.’

‘Oh, to be sure,’ said Harriet, recalling the stories of the young boy who grew up in Faerie. ‘He was taken away to live in Faerie, in an enchanted castle, and has not been seen these seven years. Was he turned into a bear?’

‘No, dear,’ said Emma. ‘The bear story is another young man. But Master Frank Charmall was indeed taken into Faerie and adopted by his wealthy aunt when he was a small boy. Poor Master Weston has barely seen him, for his son is rarely permitted to enter England, is that not so?’

‘It is just as you say,’ said Mistress Weston, moving down the table, lifting each glass. ‘But recently Frank was able to get a letter sent to us while he was close to the border, in the south.’

She addressed her tale to Harriet with a mix of satisfaction and anxiety.

‘There is a little island called Fortune, where there is an opening between Faerie and England at certain times of the year, and Frank was able to venture over the border for a while, and messages were sent back and forth between Frank and ourselves.’

‘He writes a very good letter,’ Emma added. ‘Such an elegant hand for a man.’

‘And he wrote to say that he would beg of his aunt that she might release him to visit his father, in honour of our marriage. And so, the Green Man’s blessing would be most welcome, for it always includes the spirit of hospitality, does it not?’

‘It does indeed,’ Emma assured her.

‘Master Charmall’s aunt sounds very disagreeable,’ Harriet observed.

‘She is a difficult and capricious woman,’ Mistress Weston said. ‘She rarely lets poor Frank out of her sight. Even when she is away from home herself, which she often is, she insists on him remaining at her manor.’

‘How dreadful,’ said Harriet. ‘He sounds as though he is quite a prisoner.’

‘I fear to some extent he is.’

‘But why did Master Weston give up his son to her?’

‘She had a claim on him as his kin,’ said Mistress Weston. ‘Master Weston was not as you see him now in those days. He was greatly reduced in circumstances after the death of Frank’s mother. He had barely the means to raise a child, and the aunt stepped in and quite persuaded him that it would be for Frank’s good to be adopted by her.’

‘Master Weston trusted he would be raised up to be a great gentleman,’ said Emma. ‘And an heir to a good estate.’

‘But Master Weston could not have foreseen that Frank would have been spirited away from England for most of his life,’ said Mistress Weston. ‘And though he has come of age these three years, yet his aunt will not release him into independence, but keeps him bound to her.’

‘She sounds very selfish,’ said Harriet. ‘Making a prisoner of her own nephew. But what did you mean, Mistress Weston, when you talked of being *safe*?’

Mistress Weston looked troubled and cast a glance at Emma.

‘I have told Harriet about *her*,’ Emma said.

‘What have you told me, Mistress Woodhouse?’ Harriet felt a little prickle pass over her skin. Mistress Weston and Mistress Woodhouse both looked so grave, as though there were some terrible secret haunting them.

‘The witch, Harriet. Recall I told you the story of the witch and Papa and the salad leaves.’ Emma unconsciously put a hand to her crown of hair.

‘Yes, to be sure I remember that dreadful story.’

‘The witch of the Wild Woods met Master Weston one day, when he was newly widowed,’ said Mistress Weston. ‘She was prowling about the outskirts of Highbury, up to mischief, and he had the misfortune to meet her as he rode home one night, across the heath.’

‘Dear me,’ said Harriet. ‘But why should she wish to cast misfortune upon him when he was only riding home?’

‘He had interrupted her vile workings, for she had trapped a poor fairy and was taking it away to do what foulness she wished with it. He challenged her right to enter into the domain of the Green Man.’

Harriet paled to hear this. ‘How brave of him to challenge her. What happened? Did she throw his horse? Did she curse him?’

‘Worse. She threatened to take his son, his little motherless child to be her slave in place of the fairy she had lost.’

‘Dear me! What a dreadfully wicked thing to do! What did Master Weston do next?’

‘You can imagine his anxiety. He thought to take little Frank far away, so the witch should not know what county they dwelt in, but he had not the means. He was quite poor at that time. So when Frank’s aunt made her offer to take the little boy—’

‘It seemed the most providential thing in all the world!’ finished Harriet. ‘Poor little Frank would be quite safe in an enchanted manor with a powerful aunt to look after him. No wicked witch could steal him from a Faerie manor!’

‘Quite so,’ said Mistress Weston. ‘And that is the sad conclusion of the tale of Frank.’

‘But now there is new hope,’ said Emma brightly. ‘With the blessing of the Green Man, we shall bring Frank home again, I am sure of it.’

Harriet beamed with pleasure at such a happy ending, but Mistress Weston did not look convinced. She put down the last of the glasses. ‘I think it will still be hard for Frank to get away. Master Weston has quite set his heart on Frank being here this month, but I think the aunt will delay it.’

‘What a pity he could not ride up to Highbury from the south,’ said Harriet innocently. ‘I wonder that he did not jump on his horse and fly up here. If he should have a Faerie mount, he could ride as the wind and be here in no time.’

Mistress Weston looked a little troubled by this, as though she had thought the same thing, and was trying not to dwell on it.

‘Master Frank Charmall would certainly have wasted no opportunity to come, had he been at liberty,’ said Emma confidently. ‘If he were restrained in the south, it must have been something of importance.’

‘Thank you, Emma,’ said Mistress Weston softly.

‘I have long held a foretelling regarding Master Frank Charmall,’ said Emma. ‘I foretell that he will certainly come to Highbury. I have been anticipating it for many years, and you know that my foretellings always come to pass.’

‘Indeed they do,’ agreed Mistress Weston. ‘But can you foretell if the weather will hold off from snow tomorrow?’ She moved to the window to look at the clouds gathering in the sky. ‘Your father would certainly be induced to remain at home if it were to snow, and then all my preparations will be for naught.’

‘I checked the weather vane this morning,’ Harriet said.

‘And what did it predict?’

‘That it would snow. Sorry. But not until later tomorrow night,’ she added quickly. ‘It shall not snow until after moonrise.’

‘Then we shall be sure to be on our way here before moonrise,’ said Emma. ‘We shall close the shutters and curtains, so we can see no snow

from within. Of course, if it is a heavy fall, we shall have to leave a little earlier than hoped, but we will have our Yuletide feast.'

'I think it will only be a light fall of snow,' Harriet assured Mistress Weston. 'The weather fox fluffs his tail up when it is to snow, and this morning his tail was only a very little fluffed up. Poor thing,' she murmured, 'his elemental charm is fading. He will be quite green with verdigris if things do not change for the better.'

'How are you at the school?' Mistress Weston asked. 'It must be difficult with Mother Goodword gone, and the school closed up. I almost feel ashamed of looking forward to the pleasures of Yuletide season when things are so worrisome in the village. I wish I could invite you all to Randalls, but I fear Master Woodhouse would be alarmed to hear that there at two unexpected guests.'

'Papa would be anxious,' Emma agreed. 'You know him too well. It is a marvel that he has agreed to come. It is precisely because it is a small party of his most familiar friends and family that he has been persuaded.'

'I hope your Godmother Sisters will enjoy some Yuletide cheer, even if the school is empty at present. I shall ask Cook to boil some extra figgy puddings and send them over. What a pity Mother Goodword has not come back in time for Yuletide.'

Harriet imagined to herself what a dreadful thing it would be for Mother Goodword to appear at that precise time. Were she to come now, she would find the school closed and the wand missing and what would she say to that?



'YOU BOUGHT A DRAGON FROM A ROAMER!' cried Rue. 'Merciful Mushrooms, Myrtle, what was you thinking of?'

Rue was at the door of the school entrance. Harriet was hiding behind a cabinet in the hall, ready to run if the dragon-creature was to fly at her or breathe fire.

'I rescued him,' said Myrtle, standing unrepentant on the doorstep. 'I had to.' She could go no further, for Cloe-Claws stood guard in the doorway, hissing and growling at the dragon who was flapped its wings and puffed out red, sparky clouds in reply. The tree sprites in the courtyard

awoke from their wintry slumbering, and squealed with terror at the scent below them.

‘But what are you going to do with it?’ cried Rue. ‘Where are you going to put it?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Myrtle, looking down at the creature she held on the chain. He was rising a few feet into the air, then dropping again, as he rebuffed the insults of Cloe-Claws.

Myrtle’s defiance wilted a little.

‘Well, it can’t come in here,’ Rue said firmly, her hands on hips. Not that Myrtle could get past Cloe-Claws even if she wished to.

Myrtle had never realised how big and powerful Cloe-Claws could be when she needed to. She was rather impressive.

‘Dragons are dangerous and unpredictable,’ said Rue. ‘Anything could happen. The whole school could burn down.’

‘I’ll take him to the old barn,’ said Myrtle, the idea coming to her in that moment.

THE OLD BARN was made of stone and had been a shelter in the days of the Dragon War. No one used it for anything now, other than storing unwanted furniture, but it kept its enchantment in its stones, causing it to be fireproof, and invisible to any except those who knew its exact location, or had enough magic to see it.

‘I suppose you’re still hungry,’ said Myrtle, eyeing the dragon who sat up on the barn floor making whining noises.

‘Let’s make you up a bed,’ she looked about at the abandoned bed frames and broken chairs for something to make a den out of. A rolled-up old rug and a pile of sacks caught her eye.

‘Now, stay here, while I find you something to eat.’

The dragon turned round and round and flopped with a sigh onto the nest, as though he were too exhausted to protest. He watched her gravely, his head resting on his forelegs.

She looked back at it, admiring the way its dark blue scales overlapped so beautifully. ‘Be good while I’m gone. You’re safe here.’ It gave a little green puff in reply.

A BAD BUSINESS. A GOOD SCHEME.

Harriet poked her head round the door of the sitting room where the Sisters gathered in the evening. She looked gingerly about.

‘Don’t worry, it ain’t here,’ said Rue, bending at the fireplace, stirring up the fire, ready to throw on another log. It had turned colder, and the copper fox’s tail had fluffed out considerably larger since Harriet had checked it that morning.

Harriet came in, when satisfied that there was no dragon lurking beneath the furniture. ‘Do you think she’s gone mad?’ she said, sitting near the fire and holding her hands towards the flames to warm them. ‘Bringing a dragon back with her? What a mercy the school is empty, can you imagine how scared the girls would have been?’

‘The whole village has gone mad,’ said Rue. ‘This morning when I was out looking for clues, I met Farmer Mitchell complainin’ there was poachers or trolls stealing game from him. The metalsmith said all his silver’s been took, and he’s sure he saw a darkling dwarf running off with it down the street. The miller won’t work, ‘cause he saw troll tracks round his mill, so there’s no flour to be had, and the butcher’s wife disappeared and were found wandering in circles half way to Langham, saying she was following a fairy to the pool.’

‘You don’t mean to say she was being lured?’ said Harriet, recalling the tales of wicked nixies in the pool near Langham who lured folk to a watery fate. They had been sent away over the border when the bridge had been closed; a reappearance of them was very troubling.

‘But this is dreadful, the bridge must be opening for darklings to be abroad.’ Harriet stared at the flickering flames in the fire, seeing the horrors

of nixies and goblins and trolls and dragons. ‘Oh, Rue, what are we to do?’

‘Find the thief and undo all the mischief,’ said Rue, rubbing her forehead vigorously as though trying to think up a solution. ‘I can’t find no clue at all.’

‘I did have one thought...’ began Harriet, recalling the conversation she’d had with Mistress Perry. ‘It seems unlikely, but I can’t stop wondering about it, and I was going to ask you and Myrtle what you thought.’

‘Spit it out, Harriet.’

Harriet flinched at Rue’s coarse expression. Rue saw the look. ‘Pray, do tell, Harriet,’ she said with decorum.

‘I think someone in the village...’ Harriet spoke hesitantly ‘...is concocting a love potion. A strong one. And to make it work...’

‘They’d need magic to activate it,’ completed Rue. Her eyes brightened, and she stopped rubbing her forehead. ‘Who is it?’

Harriet hesitated. ‘It’s only an idea. I don’t know for certain...’

‘Tripe and Tatties on Toast, Harriet, spit it out, things are right desperate!’

‘Master Elftyn,’ Harriet whispered.

‘Have you seen this concoction?’

‘No. But the ingredients for a love potion were taken from the storeroom, and Master Elftyn said something the other day about using his own exertions regarding a marriage proposal, and when he said it, it was the strangest thing, but he looked... not like Master Elftyn.’

‘You mean, not a vain and shallow coxcomb?’

‘Rue! How could you say such a thing of him? Master Elftyn is—’

‘I know what you think of him, but his charm don’t work on me. Now, how can we find out for sure if what you suspect is true? Let’s talk to Myrtle about it.’

‘But she must be in the barn,’ protested Harriet. ‘I saw her take half a side of bacon out earlier.’

‘So, let’s get out to the barn.’ Myrtle jumped up from her chair. ‘Come on.’

Harriet hesitated, squeezing her fingers together tightly. ‘I am very frightened of dragons,’ she said.

‘I don’t care for ‘em either. But so far I’ve only seen it blow smoke.’

Harriet made a little whimper.

‘I’ll get her to come in here,’ said Rue.

An idea struck Harriet, and her face lit up, but Rue had gone.



THE SCENT of coming snow was strong as Rue picked her way through the twilight to the stone barn. If Rue had not known exactly where to look, she would never have found the barn, for the track leading to it had been magicked to lead elsewhere. She ignored the track before her eyes, walking by the light of her lantern and following her senses.

She rapped at the wooden door. 'It's me!' she called out, not wishing to startle Myrtle, or rather, startle a dragon. Who knew what dragons did when startled?

Myrtle appeared at the door, looking a little wild with her black hair tumbling loose from its knitting needle. Her eyes were ink-dark in the shadows.

'Are you going to stay out here all night?' Rue asked. 'You'll freeze.'

'I don't want to leave him alone,' said Myrtle. 'I've made a bit of a fire. Though, he doesn't seem to like it, which is odd for a dragon.'

Rue looked over at the corner where a cracked brazier held a sorry fire. The dragon had made a nest out of sacking as far from the fire as he could get. 'Is that a safe thing to give it for a bed? One little flame...'

'He doesn't have any flame. I think he's too young.'

That made an important difference. Rue felt emboldened enough to step nearer to look at the creature. Myrtle closed the door behind her. In the soft lamplight, as it lay on his back, playing with something between its talons, it looked almost appealing. But then Rue realised what it was it was playing with. A dead mouse. 'Ugh!' she said, as it took a little nibble of it before tossing it up in the air again. 'Revolting.'

'He is a dragon,' said Myrtle. 'Though what kind, I'm not sure.' She frowned.

'I s'pose you're itching to get to the library and look it up?'

'I am. I need to know what he is, and where he's come from, and how to get him home again.'

'Well, you'd best come back to the school and hear what Harriet's got to say, I think she might have found a clue to the thief.'

'She has? What is it?'

‘Come and hear for yourself. You can’t stay out here all night, an’ she won’t come out, she’s right scared of that thing. We need to make a plan.’

‘All right, I’ll come. But first, watch this!’ She picked up a piece of kindling and tossed it across the barn; the dragon squealed and pounced on it. It sat up with the stick in its mouth, tossed it in the air, then swallowed it with a few crunches.

‘Am I supposed to be impressed?’ said Rue.

‘Did you see how fast he moved? Did you see how powerful his teeth are?’

Rue stared at her friend. ‘You’ve gone soft over it.’

‘I feel a bond with him. I can’t explain it. It’s very inconvenient, I don’t welcome the responsibility, I assure you.’

‘Come on, let’s go. We’ve got important things to decide.’

‘Wait!’ said Myrtle. ‘What’s that noise?’

They froze, listening hard. There was a strange noise outside. Whatever it was, it was not human. It had a metallic ting and rattle to it.

‘You don’t think it’s the Wild Hunt going by, do you?’ Rue whispered, her brown eyes widening. ‘It used to go by at Yuletide.’

‘That was centuries ago,’ whispered back Myrtle. ‘What would bring the Wild Hunt here?’

‘A dragon?’

There was a sharp banging at the door, and both Sisters jumped. The dragon dropped its headless mouse and blew a stream of red smoke from his nostrils.

Rue was about to call out, and ask who was there, but Myrtle put a finger to her lips to silence her. No one knew where they were, save Harriet, and few people knew how to navigate the hidden path. But the dragon let out a half-barking sound and a half-squeal. Whoever, or whatever, it was, they would know someone was inside now!

The door flew open, crashing against the wall behind it. Rue gave a yell – Myrtle rushed to stand in front of the creature, pulling her knife from her reticule and looking as fierce as a mother dragon.

‘Get back!’ Myrtle yelled as a bulky figure in clanking armour came crashing into the barn. A knight come to slay the dragon! How did he know where to find it? Myrtle raised her knife, though it would be no defence against a knightly sword.

But the knight had no sword. Nor shield. And he seemed to have trouble walking. He lurched forwards, gave a little totter, and fell with a jangling crash to the floor. The dragon shrieked, ran back and forth, then leapt into Myrtle's arms, knocking her to the floor.

Rue found her courage and rushed at the knight, lifting the visor to see who it was who had launched this strange attack.

'Harriet!'

Harriet groaned. 'Help me up!'

'Merciful Mushrooms, Harriet, what are you playing at!' cried Myrtle, sitting up, her black hair strangely wreathed in red smoke.

'Sorry. Did I frighten you?'

'You frightened the dragon!'

'Harriet, what *are* you up to?' Rue cried, helping her up with considerable effort.

Harriet pushed hair out of her eyes. Her face flushed. 'I thought the armour would, you know, protect me.'

'From what?' said Rue.

'The dragon. It's Lady Stormont's dragon-proof armour from the library.'

'Yes, I can see that!' said Rue in amazement. 'Blazing Bullfrogs, Harriet!' And she burst out laughing.

Rue's laugh was big and earthy and infectious, and Harriet's mouth twitched into a smile, and then a giggle. Myrtle glared at them both and pushed the dragon off from her, carefully navigating claws. The dragon sensed the mirth, and began blowing little blue puffs of smoke, jiggling up and down as Rue gave way to hilarity.

It took some time for Rue to regain composure enough to talk sensibly. But eventually the mood quietened, the dragon curled up and fell asleep, and the subject of Master Elftyn and his love powder was discussed in detail.

'We have to search his house,' said Rue. 'That's where the wand must be.'

'If he has it,' said Harriet miserably, still feeling she was acting traitorously. But Rue was right, finding the wand was of the utmost importance, but, oh, if it should come at the price of all Master Elftyn's goodness being not so very good after all, what a bitter blow that would be!

‘We need to find a way of getting him out of the house long enough to search it,’ said Myrtle. ‘Does he have a brownie?’

‘I think so,’ said Harriet. ‘I did not see one, I only saw the housekeeper when I was there recently, she was so kind as to give Mistress Woodhouse a new lace for her shoe when she broke it. She talked of a sister in Tythewell. She would be going there for Yuletide, to be sure.’

‘But what about the brownie?’ said Myrtle with a frown.

‘If there’s stolen magic in the house, the brownie would be right jittery,’ said Rue. ‘We’ll tell her we’re on Godmothering business. She might even help us.’

‘We had best not make any mess while searching,’ said Harriet, thinking that the wrath of a brownie was not something she wished to encounter.

‘But how to get him out of the house when everyone is staying home in such wintry weather,’ pondered Myrtle.

‘He’s going out tomorrow evening,’ said Harriet quietly. ‘He’s going to the Yuletide party at the Westons. A carriage is picking him up at seven o’clock, and the party will not break up till eleven.’

‘Harriet, that’s genius!’ exclaimed Rue.

Harriet blushed, more in shame than pleasure. Why did she always find herself so divided? What was it Mother Goodword had said about choices and knowing her own heart? What was her heart choosing at this moment? It was so hard to know, for she wanted to think well of Master Elftyn, wanted him to be the exemplary gentleman she’d thought him, and yet she wanted to find Mother Goodword’s wand above anything, and see everything back to normal in Highbury – but Master Elftyn a thief! It was too horrible an idea.

‘Are you listening, Harriet?’ Rue knocked on Harriet’s helmet sending a ringing noise through her.

‘Sorry, Rue. What were you saying?’

‘That we’ll leave here tomorrow evening, if we wait till about nine o’clock, no one will be abroad in the street to see us, and we’ll have at least two hours before he returns. We’ll search the house room by room.’

‘How will we get in?’ Harriet asked. ‘There are bound to be protection charms on the doors.’

‘Most protection charms ain’t working,’ Rue reminded her. ‘That’s how come all these thefts are going on. Oh, if we could only find it and

everything be made right again!' Rue groaned loudly with longing, and the dragon, who had settled down to sleep, stirred at the sound.

'It's not as scary as I thought,' said Harriet, regarding the sleeping dragon. 'It's quite small without its wings out, flapping up and down, and hissing and screeching. Is it a baby, do you think?'

'I'm not sure,' said Myrtle. 'If he's a fire-breather then he must be young, for he hasn't got his flame yet.'

'No flame? So, I didn't need all this?' Harriet looked down at her armour.

Rue chuckled. 'You know, you looked scary yourself when you came through that door.' She laughed again at the remembrance. 'I was ready to run for it, and Myrtle was ready to fight you.'

'Me? Look scary?' Harriet had taken off the gauntlets; she touched the smooth finish of the fae-silver breastplate with the insignia of Lady Stormont carved upon it: three thorny roses entwined. 'I do feel braver in it.'

'Perhaps the spirit of Lady Stormont lingers,' said Myrtle.

The dragon stirred again. Its eyelids opened to reveal eyes the colour of red carnelians. It lifted its small head on its long neck. It seemed to be sniffing something. Myrtle watched in fascination, Rue watched warily, and Harriet gave a little whimper as the dragon stretched its neck towards the discarded gauntlets.

'What's happening to his head?' Rue asked. The dragon's head was changing from deep blue to a silvery hue.

The dragon drew back again. The silver faded from his head and he resumed his usual colour.

'Strange creature,' said Rue with a hint of distaste.

'Fascinating creature,' said Myrtle. 'I can't wait to look up what it is.'

'So we know what we've got to do tomorrow,' said Rue.

'We do,' said Myrtle firmly.

'To be sure,' said Harriet resignedly. 'Oh dear! I'm to go to the Westons' with Mistress Woodhouse! It's to be the most delightful Yuletide dinner! What shall I say to Mistress Woodhouse? How can I say I will not go?'

'We'll tell her you're ill,' said Myrtle. 'A bad cold.'

'I hate pretending.'

'We'll all have colds if we sit out here much longer,' said Rue pulling her cloak tighter about her.

‘You don’t have to sit out here,’ said Myrtle. ‘Go to bed.’

‘I shan’t sleep,’ said Rue. ‘I’ll be thinking about tomorrow evening. It will be the best Yuletide ever if we get the wand back. I wonder if Busie will make a Yuletide feast for us – gingerbread and syllabub and figgy pudding!’

‘It would be wonderful to get back to normal,’ agreed Myrtle. Then she glanced at the sleeping dragon. Rue saw the look.

‘What are you going to do with it, Myrtle? You can’t keep a dragon in Highbury.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Why don’t you ask Master Woodhouse or Master Knightley about it?’ suggested Harriet. ‘They might know what to do. That is, I’m sure Master Knightley would know what the right thing to do with a dragon is, but Master Woodhouse might be even more scared than me.’

‘Tell Master Knightley that I have a dragon!’ said Myrtle, her eyes lighting up with indignation. ‘I know what he’d do! He once told me he would use his ancestral sword if faced with a darkling.’ Her eyes shone fiercely at the thought of it. ‘Don’t you tell anyone about the dragon,’ she warned.

‘I won’t,’ said Harriet meekly. Even inside the armour she still found Myrtle’s glare as terrifying as any dragon.

‘Until tomorrow evening, then,’ said Rue with relish. ‘First, we find the wand, then we celebrate!’

BEFORE MIDNIGHT

‘**H**arriet, this is too bad!’

Mistress Woodhouse looked so genuinely sorry, that Harriet really did feel dreadful as she huddled beneath her bedclothes. It was too horrible to have to deceive her dearest friend in all the world in such a manner. But there was nothing for it; Godmothering duties must come first.

Mistress Woodhouse had brought a chivalric romance for Harriet to read, a bottle of her father’s medicinal wine, and a jar of Serle’s apple jelly. ‘They are Donwell apples,’ she assured Harriet, who lay looking pale against her bed pillows, though not from actual illness, but from the misery of her confusions.

‘*The Romance of the Enchanted Forest*,’ Mistress Woodhouse said, holding up the book. ‘I know it’s your favourite.’

‘Thank you. You are so good to me.’

‘Do not attempt to speak, dear.’ Emma put the basket of goods on Harriet’s dressing table. ‘You must not hurt your throat further. My poor Harriet, it really is too bad. To be unwell on Midwinter Eve when we were so looking forward to the feast at the Weston’s, and my sister and her family have come, and I did so want you to meet them all. You will be delighted with the children. And Master Knightley and I have quite made up after our little quarrel, and so I did think everything was as near perfect as it could be this Midwinter, except for the little troubles about the village.’

Harriet nodded pitifully, and opened her mouth to reply, but Emma put a hand up to silence her. ‘Do not speak. Shall I sit and talk nonsense to you for a half hour to take your mind off your poor throat, or would you rather sleep?’

‘I think I had better rest.’

‘I quite agree. I shall send for word of you at regular intervals, and you must send word back by the servant if there is anything you need.’

Harriet felt tears prick her eyes at such kindness; dear Mistress Woodhouse did not deserve to be treated with such duplicity.

‘I shall leave you to sleep, dear.’

‘Wait!’

Mistress Woodhouse paused at the foot of the bed.

‘When you go to the Westons, do take care about what you eat and drink, Mistress Woodhouse.’

‘Why, Harriet, you sound like my father. Take care indeed, as if I need fear anything from Mistress Weston’s table.’

‘You don’t understand,’ Harriet pulled herself into a sitting position, ‘it is very important, Mistress Woodhouse, indeed it is – you *must not* eat nor drink *anything* that you have not seen poured or plated up right in front of you. Will you do that? I cannot explain all, but I fear you may be in danger of some mischievous magic. Please say you will do as I beg?’

‘Harriet, I think you must be beginning a fever, but I would not see you vexed for the world. I shall neither eat nor drink what I do not see prepared directly before me, if that will ease your mind.’

‘Thank you, Mistress Woodhouse!’ Harriet fell back against the pillows.

‘How distressed Master Elftyn will be when he hears of your sad state,’ Emma said in parting.

‘Oh, what a muddle!’ Harriet moaned, when the bedroom door had closed.



MASTER ELFTYN HUMMED a festive tune as he smoothed his hair, arranged his cravat, and pocketed the little package of love powder. His new velvet cloak awaited him. It had been a considerable expense, but such things as new cloaks and cravats would be mere trifles once he had gained his prosperous bride.

‘If you please, sir,’ said his housekeeper, rapping her knuckles on the dressing room door, ‘I’ll be off to my sister’s now. There’s homity pie in the pantry, a new loaf and apple butter, and a figgy pudding for your dinner

tomorrow. Fernley will keep things spick and span and the fire tended, though...' the housekeeper lowered her voice, speaking quietly through the crack of the open door, '...she's still not right, Master Elftyn. I cannot fathom what the problem is, but an out-of-sorts brownie is no good thing, sir.'

'All will be well, Mistress Goodenough,' Master Elftyn called back. 'A touch of seasonal disorder, you know how over-sensitive they are.'

'Master Elftyn!' hissed his housekeeper. 'Take care what you speak, dreadful bad luck to offend them!'

'Good bye for now,' was Master Elftyn's cheerful reply. 'Midwinter greetings, and so forth. See you when the festivities are over.'

Mistress Goodenough shook her head at her careless master, and Master Elftyn rolled his eyes at his overcautious housekeeper.

He moved to the window, to watch her stout figure trundle down the garden path and out of the gate. Then he darted to his bed and lifted the mattress, made an 'Oops!' to himself, and darted to his clothes chest, his head disappearing into it as he rummaged for a pair of gloves.

With gloves on, he could now draw out the iron box from beneath his mattress. His elven blood was diluted by three generations, but it still caused a sensitivity to the horrible feel of iron.

He paused a moment, listening for the sound of Fernley on the stairs, but no sound came. It was safe to open the box and finish his preparations of the love powder. Just one goodly pinch into the wassail cup of Mistress Woodhouse tonight, and she would be his, Hartfield Manor and all. And not only would he be the wealthiest man in Highbury, except for Knightley, he would be the highest-ranking man in Highbury as the new Wild Man Guardian, and what an excellent guardian he would be!

One thought troubled him as he prepared to magick his powder – would the Green Man know by what means he had procured his rise? Would he be offended? Would there be trouble? It was a risk, to be sure. But he would put the magic back first thing in the morning when he was done. And if he should succeed – all his ambitions and dearest hopes would be satisfied. It was a gamble, but faint heart never won fair lady, as some poet or other once said. All that he was doing he was doing for the good of all – Highbury *needed* a new Wild Man Guardian, and he needed a rich wife. The rumble of carriage wheels sounded from the lane. Master Elftyn sprang

up to peer out of the window. The carriage was early, that was a good sign, the fair lady was eager for his company – well, he was no less ready!

‘MASTER ELFTYN, you have heard the sad news,’ was Mistress Woodhouse’s first enquiry after greetings had been exchanged between them all.

Master Elftyn settled himself into the carriage, beaming with pleasure and good spirits. He would have liked to sit beside Mistress Woodhouse, but her brother-in-law had taken that seat.

‘Sad news?’

‘Of Harriet.’

‘But indeed!’ Master Elftyn lengthened his face and altered his voice to one of appropriate sentiment. ‘Such dreadful news! Poor Sister Harriet, to be struck down with a bad cold, and forced to miss all the delights of the evening.’

‘Such a sad loss to our party,’ said Mistress Woodhouse.

‘Dreadful! Exactly so, indeed. She will be missed every moment.’ And he gave a deep sigh which Mistress Woodhouse appreciated, judging by her soft look.

THE WESTONS MISSED no opportunity to provide their guests with comfort and cheer in the form of good fires, excellent food, and a warm welcome. How delightful it would be, Master Elftyn thought, as he entered the drawing-room, to be entering as the principal man of the party, an honour now bestowed on Master Woodhouse.

When he was master of Hartfield, he would host a Midwinter feast of his own. No expense would be spared. All might come and admire the fine fires and food and wine he should share so liberally, and bask in the wit and welcome of the master.

He took the very first opportunity to supply the love powder to Mistress Woodhouse’s cup. It was an easy matter; he had merely to suggest that she might like some refreshment, and with her grateful approbation of his kindness, he fetched them a cup each from the wassail bowl on the side-

table, slipping in the powder and feeling his own happy hopes bubble up within him as the spiced mead bubbled with the effects of the magic.

How sweetly Mistress Woodhouse smiled upon him as he put the cup into her hand. Most likely the powder was not needed – so encouraging, so inviting, so eager was her manner toward him. Surely the magic was but a seal upon the inevitable. It would merely enhance her natural feelings, and ensure that no feminine sensitivity, no maidenly modesty should cause her to resist his proposal, for he was determined to make her the happiest woman in Highbury by the offer of his heart and hand before this night was ended.

It was unfortunate that he was drawn away from his lady's side at that moment; Mistress Weston wished him to join herself and Master Woodhouse in a game of cards by the fireside. He was torn between the desire to remain by his love's side, and see her drink down the very last drop of mead, and the wish not to offend his future father-in-law by refusing to play.

His fair lady soon settled the matter by encouraging him to go, and to play gently with her papa, and the look of regret in her soft, hazel eye was touching as she bade him leave her side. He made his bow of assent all the deeper as he bid her farewell for the next half hour; he thought of taking up her hand and kissing it, but that might arouse too much feeling too soon. Best to allow the magic to work gradually, degree by degree, sip by sip.

The evening was not all quite as he could have wished. He had taken up the little name cards at the dining table and switched his own name for Master Weston's, that it might be himself who was seated by Mistress Woodhouse. But the butler, on lighting the candles on the table, had noticed the change of place, and put back the cards accordingly.

A second blow struck when it was announced that it was snowing outside, such news being most alarming to Master Woodhouse, who insisted on the party being broken up early, that they might all get home while they still could. He had not had opportunity to speak alone with his fair lady, and now the evening was to be cut short!

But there was no unlucky third blow – instead there was a delightful turn of good luck – for on leaving the party, it transpired that Mistress Woodhouse and himself were to drive home in the carriage *alone*. Who could say if the lady had not arranged this herself?

Here, then, was his chance.

The carriage passed through the sweep gate, and Master Elftyn, knowing there was but a mile of road, determined to delay not one moment longer. He seized hold of Mistress Woodhouse's hand and made his declaration of adoration.

‘Mistress Woodhouse. Emma. You must know how ardently I love you!’

Mistress Woodhouse gazed back at him, as he poured out his heart, his hopes. How happy she would make him. What a goodly couple they should be – the chief couple over all Highbury. What felicity lay before them in their union. What delight!

The lady listened, then withdrew her hand in a modest manner and, at last, she spoke.

‘I am very much astonished, Master Elftyn. This to *me*! You forget yourself – you take me for my friend – any message to Maid Smith I shall be happy to deliver; but no more to this to *me*, if you please!’

Master Elftyn was all amazement. ‘Maid Smith! Maid Smith!’ This was some error, some jest, some feminine ploy, and most earnestly did he resume the subject of his own passion, and was very urgent for a favourable answer. But no favourable answer was given.

He was vexed. He was angry. He was confused. Why had the magic failed? Why had this young woman, sitting in icy pose across from him, avoiding his eye and clearly wishing him gone from her, why had she shown him so much encouragement only to confound him with such behaviour? Why did she harbour the delusion that he had been playing court to *Maid Smith* these many weeks?

He felt somewhat dazed as the carriage came to a halt, and the door was pulled open by the coachman.

He could not say one word of parting, he was too astonished.

‘Good night,’ the lady said, her tone as cold as snow from the depth of the carriage.

‘Good night,’ he replied, summoning up some vestige of pride. ‘Wait,’ he said, before the carriage door closed; his befuddled mind grasped for some reason, some explanation.

‘Yes?’

‘The wassail cup I brought to you. Did you drink it?’

‘What a singular question.’ Surprise tinged the crispness of her voice. The carriage creaked into motion. ‘I do not care for mead,’ were the lady's parting words. ‘I never drink it.’

The carriage moved on, and he watched it go, as snowflakes pattered down softly on his new velvet cloak.



THE THREE SISTERS picked their way down the broadway in the dark, their forgetfulness cloaks raised up, and their firefly lanterns covered. The cold did not surprise them, for the copper fox had promised snow. They turned down Green Lane, removing the covers from the lanterns just in time to startle away a pair of imps who were plotting to trip them up in the dark.

There was only one lamplight glowing from Master Elftyn's cottage, and it came from the kitchen, where likely the brownie was at work. They had agreed that Harriet would do the talking; there was something about Harriet's sweet manner and soft blue eyes that the fae liked. She got teased less than most people.

'Midwinter greetings,' said Harriet, when she had rapped the swan-shaped door knocker, and the door had opened a few inches. 'We come on Godmothering business. We have reason to think that someone may have hidden an object of stolen magic within your house. Perhaps you have noticed something amiss? Perhaps you have come across something in your work?'

The door did not move, and no sound was made. Harriet looked round at Rue and Myrtle for aid, wondering what else she could say to persuade the brownie to let them in, but they had no suggestions. The three Sisters stood on the doorstep, the door remained almost closed, and Harriet was desperately trying to think of something that would engage a brownie's assistance.

'I hear this is the best-kept cottage in all of Highbury,' she said. 'How many times I have walked by and admired the pretty curtains at the window and the shiny door knocker. It would be too dreadful to see such a well-kept house ruined by the Wild Man pulling it apart, searching for stolen magic.'

The door opened a few inches more.

'Good thinking, Harriet,' whispered Rue.

'If we could but come in and search ever so carefully for the magic. We would not leave one tiny bit of mess behind us, no one would know we had

even been here. And there would be no angry Wild Man come to ransack the house.'

The door opened wide enough to admit entry, and the Sisters filed in, taking care to wipe their boots on the mat.

'I'll search in here,' said Rue, moving to the parlour.

'I'll search the housekeeper's room,' said Myrtle.

'I'll go upstairs,' said Harriet, feeling awkward, for no visitor would ever go upstairs. She reminded herself that she was not a visitor, she was on important Godmothering business. So up the stairs she went.

The brownie was at the top of stairs. She gestured to Harriet to follow, then pointed at a door. Harriet pushed it open to find herself in Master Elftyn's bedchamber. It felt rather transgressive to be standing in his most private of spaces. There was the bed he lay down on every night, with its patchwork coverlet. There was his washstand, his shaving implements, his comb, his shelf full of grooming treatments. He used a surprising number of those.

There was his little dressing room, adjoining the bedroom. Three discarded cravats lay on the back of a chair, as though he had tried several on before being satisfied with his appearance. She was surprised by the size of his mirror; it was as large as the one she had seen in Anne Cox's dressing room.

She found a few dried chamomile petals beneath the tall boy, and there was a trace of a smell of speedwell lingering in the air. Was this where he had mixed up his love powder?

She looked carefully through the tallboy, even pulling out the drawers to check for hidden compartments. She went through the clothes chest, blushing at sorting through the linen shorts and silk stockings.

She rolled back the rug on the floor to check every board for loose ones. She felt the lining of the curtains, the pillowcases, the eiderdown – but there was nothing.

Heavy footsteps sounded on the stairs, and Rue appeared in the doorway. 'Found anything?'

Harriet shook her head. 'I've searched everywhere. I don't understand, for I'm sure the brownie said there was something in here.'

Myrtle came in. 'I've been through everything,' she said.

'Me too,' said Rue. She sat down on the clothes chest, looking about the room. 'Did you check under the mattress?'

‘No,’ said Harriet. ‘Help me lift it, Rue.’

Rue’s sturdy arms lifted it easily, and Harriet dove under it. ‘I’ve got something!’ came her muffled voice, she pulled out a book. Myrtle plucked it from her.

‘Spells for Spinsters, Charms for Bachelors: how to secure a spouse in nine easy steps. Well, this is evidence!’

‘But it ain’t a wand,’ said Rue. ‘Is there nothing else under there? Feel the bottom of the mattress.’

Myrtle pulled her knitting needle from her hair and poked at the underside of the mattress. There was a dull thunk as her wand struck something.

‘There *is* something inside it!’ Harriet cried. She put her hand into a loose seam, rummaged about and withdrew a long iron box.

‘Ha!’ cried Rue, dropping the mattress in triumph. ‘He hid it in iron, so the magic wouldn’t be sensed, the sneaky toady, but we found him out!’

Harriet undid the catch and flung back the lid.

‘Oh,’ said Harriet.

‘Empty,’ said Myrtle.

Rue snatched the box, turned it upside down and shook it, not quite believing that there was no wand inside.

‘Perhaps he took it with him,’ suggested Myrtle.

‘Or p’raps the brownie got it wrong,’ said Rue.

‘Perhaps he’s *not* a thief,’ said Harriet.

‘He is,’ insisted Myrtle, tapping the book.

‘What’s that noise?’ said Harriet.

Rue was nearest to the window overlooking the front garden. She lifted a corner of the closed curtains. ‘Blasted Bullfrogs! It’s him!’

Harriet rushed to her side to peek out.

‘I thought you said he wouldn’t be home before eleven?’ said Rue.

‘He’s early,’ gasped Harriet, seeing the carriage door open, and Master Elftyn alighting in a handsome black cloak with snowflakes dusting his head and shoulders. ‘They must have broken up the party early because of the weather.’

‘We’ve got to get out without him seeing us,’ said Rue.

‘Is there a back door in the kitchen?’ asked Myrtle.

‘No,’ said Harriet. ‘There’s only the front door.’

‘Merciful Mushrooms, we’re in for it now,’ said Rue. ‘Let’s just brazen it out.’ She dropped the curtain and squared her shoulders.

‘Oh, Rue, what are you going to say?’ Harriet looked terrified. But Rue had left the room, clunked down the steps, and stepped out into the garden.

MASTER ELFTYN DID NOT IMMEDIATELY NOTICE the young woman stood on his porch. His head was bent dejectedly, his shoulders hunched, and he slammed the garden gate shut with a show of temper. He made a ‘*Waaahh!*’ of fright when Rue stepped into his path.

‘Who are you?’ he cried, moving back a step. Then he peered again into the shadows. ‘Are you mortal?’

Rue took advantage of this confusion, and swirled her cloak about her in a dramatic manner, saying in her best voice, the one she used for queens in storytelling with the schoolchildren, ‘I have come on behalf of the offended, to take back what you have stolen. Return the wand or suffer a fulsome, folsome fate from the Court of Faerie!’

Master Elftyn made an odd strangled sound and staggered back another step. ‘How did you know? Who told you?’ He pulled something out from beneath his cloak and held it out.

‘The wand!’ cried Rue, dropping her queen’s voice and dashing forward to snatch up the slender wand.

The door behind her opened, and a gleam of light illuminated her.

‘You’re no Faerie servant!’ he sputtered, now that she was close enough for him to see by the light from the doorway. ‘You’re one of those Godmother girls from the school!’

Myrtle came to stand beside Rue, and Harriet lingered behind them, as though to hide, but she hid in vain.

‘You!’ cried Master Elftyn, pointing at Harriet. ‘Why, you traitorous little – you were supposed to help me! What kind of useless Godmother are you?’

‘I’m sorry,’ Harriet whimpered. ‘But why did you do it, Master Elftyn? I never would have believed you could *steal*.’

‘Do what? Get out of my garden! What are you doing in my house? I’ll get the authorities onto you! I’ll have you thrown out of Highbury, you meddling little—!’

‘You’ll be the one thrown out of Highbury,’ said Myrtle. ‘For stealing magic.’

Master Elftyn drew himself up and glared at her. ‘I did not steal it.’

‘Oh, you just *borrowed* it, I s’pose,’ said Rue.

‘I *recovered* it.’

‘From where?’ demanded Rue.

‘From whom?’ said Myrtle.

Master Elftyn hesitated. ‘I cannot say. But I was going to return it.’

‘When?’ said Myrtle. ‘When you’d finished endangering all of Highbury just to satisfy your own ambition?’

‘I was going to return it in the morning. I’ve only had it one day.’

Rue snorted in disbelief.

‘Did it work, Master Elftyn?’ Harriet said. ‘It is very bad to *make* someone marry you.’

‘No, it did not work,’ snapped the disappointed man. ‘No more than *your* useless schemes did. I’m done with matchmaking and magic nonsense. I’m going to get myself a wife the sensible way. Now take that wand and get out of my garden!’

‘I’ve a mind to tell the Wild Man what you’ve done, if you don’t tell us who you got this from,’ Rue said, holding up the wand.

‘Rue, take care,’ Harriet begged ‘Don’t wave it about, you might activate it.’

But Rue ignored Harriet and looked to Myrtle. ‘Have you got a rhyme for extracting the truth?’

‘I’m sure I can think of one.’

‘You mustn’t make any new spells!’ cried Harriet.

‘We’ve got to know if he’s the thief,’ Rue said, still holding the wand aloft.

‘I tell you I recovered it,’ said Master Elftyn, edging towards his front door, away from the wand. ‘I did a good deed. I did *not* steal it, and you cannot even prove that I ever had it. It’s your word against mine, and no one will believe a gaggle of silly schoolgirls over a respectable man like me!’

‘Do it, Myrtle.’ Rue handed her the wand. ‘He called us a gaggle of schoolgirls.’

‘He called us *silly*.’ Myrtle narrowed her eyes and raised the wand.

‘*Answer true, lies begone, was it you, who stole the wand?*’

The wand was activated, and a shower of tiny sparks flashed in the darkness. Master Elfytn ducked out of the way, but the sparks settled on his head, and the snowflakes on his dark hair glowed like a fairy crown. His mouth scrunched up and his face contorted as though he were trying to keep back the answer to the be-spelled question, but out popped the answer against his will.

‘I did not steal it.’

Rue and Myrtle looked at each other in surprise.

‘Well, who did?’ Rue demanded. ‘Go on, Myrtle, blast him again.’

‘Answer true, lies begone, tell us who did steal the wand!’

Another soft cloud of sparkles fell on Master Elfytn. His mouth scrunched up again, his face contorted, his lips opened to speak, but no sound came out.

‘Why ain’t he speaking?’ Rue said.

‘He can’t say it,’ said Myrtle. ‘He can’t answer the question.’

‘But he has to. It’s a be-spelled question.’

‘Has someone bound you to secrecy?’ Myrtle demanded. ‘The wand thief – did they put a binding spell on you?’

Master Elfytn nodded, still unable to speak for the moment.

‘Do you know any spells for unbinding a bind of secrecy?’ Rue asked her fellow Sisters.

Harriet shook her head.

‘Mother Goodword never taught us any,’ said Myrtle. ‘It’s advanced work.’

‘Blasted Bullfrogs and Blundering Bearcubs,’ said Rue. ‘We’re flummoxed.’

The magic faded from Master Elfytn’s head and his voice now returned. He had gained his doorstep and glared round at them.

‘Now I bid you all to leave my property before I call the authorities and report you for trespassing, impudence and *treachery*.’ The last word of insult was cast at Harriet.

‘Let’s go,’ Myrtle said. ‘It’s freezing out here. We’ve got what we came for.’

‘You ain’t heard the last of this!’ Rue could not resist saying in parting as she swept out of the garden gate.

Harriet cast a sorrowful glance at her failed ward as she left. He glared at her in return.

A SERIES OF STRANGE BLUNDERS

The Sisters spent the rest of the night planning what to do next.

‘We’ve got to undo our bad spells,’ said Rue.

‘No,’ said Myrtle, ‘you have to undo *your* bad spells. Put that chestnut sprite back to normal.’

‘And Elizabeth Martin’s cow,’ added Harriet, who’d been upset to hear of the little Welch cow turning blue, for she had grown very fond of it over the summer. She’d even had the privilege of naming it.

‘Are you sure there was nothing or nobody else you meddled with?’ Myrtle asked.

‘What do you think I am, a walking disaster?’ Rue said, her brown eyes flashing with irritation.

Myrtle and Harriet shared a look.

‘We’ve all made mistakes,’ Rue said defensively. ‘It’s not just me. Harriet swapped her perfectly good ward for a sneaking, thieving rascal, and you had the nut blunder, not to mention bringing home a fire-breathing worm.’

‘He is not a fire-breathing worm,’ said Myrtle. ‘And as for the nut incident—’

‘Please don’t argue,’ begged Harriet. ‘Don’t get angry, Rue, I can’t bear it.’

Harriet, while relieved to get the wand back, was still feeling miserable over the matchmaking failure of Master Elftyn, and wondering what Mistress Woodhouse would say about it all.

‘Harriet’s right,’ said Rue, her anger melting as quickly as it sparked up. ‘We’ve all blundered, we’re in this together. I’ll put right the sprite and the

cow, and lock up the wand where it ought to be, and everything should settle back down.'

Myrtle nodded. 'Agreed. And I'll figure out what to do about the dragon.'

Rue's mood changed. 'What are we sitting about looking so glum for?' she cried. 'We've got the wand back, and it's Midwinter Eve – we should be celebrating!' She jumped up. 'I'm going to see what Busie has made. Hope there's gingerbread!'

Rue bounded out to raid the pantry, but Harriet only sighed. 'I'm so glad and so very relieved about the wand,' she said to Myrtle, 'but we still have to finish our matchmaking assignments, and I've made such a mess of mine. Things are not quite right yet.'

'No,' agreed Myrtle. 'Rue has no clue as to Elizabeth Martin's match, you've got to start all over again with Master Knightley, and I suspect that the bailiff's boy is the one for my ward, but I don't know how I'm supposed to bring about a proposal when his mother is so against it.'

'And you've got the problem of the dragon,' Harriet reminded her.

'And I've got the problem of the dragon. Who's getting restless cooped up in the barn. He nearly escaped earlier, I caught him just in time.'

'How did he nearly escape?' Harriet's eyes widened at the thought of a dragon wandering around Highbury.

'Through some loose tiles on the roof. He must have flown up to the rafters. I secured his chain to an old bed frame, but he chewed through the wood. I caught him with his head poking out by the chimney. I could do with Master Martin coming round to fix the tiles.'

Harriet felt the usual lurch at the mention of Master Martin. 'I don't think he will ever come here again.'

'Why not? He's been coming here for years.'

Harriet could not bear to speak of the proposal and her refusal. 'We had a bit of a disagreement over something,' she said in a small voice.

'I hope you make it up. This place will fall apart without him.'

Harriet gulped and changed the subject. 'You must wish you'd never brought the dragon here. It's such a worry.'

'Yes, and no. It's a worry I could do without. And yet... it's as though there's some bond between us. I can't explain it, and I don't understand it. I've gone through all the books on dragons in the library, but I can't find out what kind of creature it is.' She frowned, staring into the fire. 'I wish

Mother Goodword would come back,' she mused. 'I don't know who else to ask advice from.'

'Oh, if only she would come back,' agreed Harriet. 'Now we've found the wand, we need not fear her return. Well, not so much as we did,' she added, thinking of all the scrapes and messes they had all fallen into since her departure.' Perhaps you should look in on the dragon,' she suggested. 'It would be dreadful if it escaped.'

'I should.' Myrtle got up. 'And no doubt it's hungry again. It likes its food as much as Rue does.'



IT RAINED the day after Midwinter, then snowed once again, the slushy ground freezing overnight. It was not the gentle snow of Midwinter Eve; it was a wilful, capricious weather of another spirit. There were murmurs that there must be a darkling in the vicinity, for the weather always turned wild and vicious when such was among them. The copper fox shivered between north and north-west, baring his verdigris teeth.

Mortal and fae alike were confined to their homes, and the wand remained locked up in Mother Goodword's desk until the weather altered and Rue could get out to put right the sprite and cow.

On the morning of the third day after Midwinter Eve, Rue could finally leave the school, the ground having cleared enough to walk out. The chestnut sprite had disappeared from the school grounds some time ago. She would have to track him down. But she knew where to find Elizabeth Martin's cow, so she determined to undo that bad spell first. With the wand tucked carefully inside her cloak, she set off for the Martins' farm.

THERE WERE STILL PATCHES of snow, and more than one frost sprite tried to coax Rue into stepping onto a patch of ice, that they might have the fun of seeing a mortal slip and tumble. 'Away with you,' she scolded, as they darted across her path. 'I've no time for games today.' And then she promptly stood on a patch of ice, hidden by carefully laid leaves. Her feet flew out before she had time to yell, and she landed on her rear with a bump. The sprites were delighted, flitting round in glee.

‘Good thing for you I’m not a vengeful witch!’ Rue told them, ‘or I’d turn you into maybugs!’ The sprites laughed all the harder.

But there was no time or desire for revenge. She had an important quest to accomplish. On she marched, avoiding any patches in the road that had little deceiving carpets of leaves. It was a dull morning, the sky thick with pewter cloud, the sun still rolled up sleepily in its cloudy blankets, as Rue liked to think. She put up the hood of her forgetfulness cloak, more for warmth than for the need of invisibility.

She did not expect to see anyone else out at such a cold and gloomy hour, so it was surprising to hear hooves and a voice from somewhere up ahead on the Donwell road.

The hooves belonged to a donkey – a limping donkey, being slowly led by a man she did not recognise.

‘Come on, Jack, there’s a good fellow,’ coaxed the man.

Rue’s curiosity was piqued. She ought not to waste one precious moment of her time being distracted from her quest. She must ignore all interesting strangers and keep to her course. She must not get into conversations... but she did so dislike seeing an animal limping... she pushed back her hood to make herself visible.

‘Morning, sir!’ she called out. ‘What ails your donkey?’

The man looked up in surprise; to his mind, there had been no one in the road a moment before.

‘Morning, maid. I little expected to see anyone else at this hour and unfriendly weather.’

‘No more did I.’

The man waited for her to approach. ‘I don’t know what’s wrong with his leg,’ he said. ‘Is there a farrier in the next village?’

Rue drew close enough to see he was a young man, perhaps twenty or so years with a pleasant face. There was something about him that looked familiar, but she could not think what it was.

‘How long’s he been limping?’

‘It began a few days ago.’

‘An’ he’s been walking all this time?’

‘No. We got caught up in the snow and took shelter at the inn on the road. Had to spend all of Midwinter there, but it was no bad thing. Friendly folk. If only the ale hadn’t been sour. Landlady said there’s been a lot of trouble with sour ale and burnt bread in recent months. She thought my

lamed donkey might result from mischief, seeing as it happened as soon as we stepped over the boundary into the neighbourhood.'

'There have been odd things happening of late,' said Rue, feeling uncomfortable at this admission. 'Let me have a look at him. I'm good with animals.' She felt it was the least she could do, seeing as he had been forced to spend all of Midwinter in a public inn.

'He's not fond of being touched by strangers,' the man warned. But Rue had already found the place behind the ears where the donkey liked to be scratched. They were very like dogs in that respect. Her gran had always said Rue's hands were big because they were full of quiet and calm, such as animals understood the language of, and her Ma had always added that it was a pity that Rue's tongue and noddle didn't carry the same qualities. It had been a family joke.

'He likes you,' said the man, sounding surprised.

Rue's fingers, moving across the animal and down the limping limb, soon found the problem. 'I don't suppose you've a thick needle about you?' she asked, her head bent over the mule's raised hoof. 'Or something like it.'

'A needle? No. But...' and he unbuckled one of the saddlebacks and rummaged for something. Rue was presented with a wallet containing such items as a traveller might carry: a knife and spoon, a shaving blade, and—

'Toothpick,' said Rue, taking the fine, sharp implement from the pouch. 'Just the thing.'

The man squatted down beside her, interested to see what she was about. His soul had a pleasant smell, she thought, her trained senses picking it up, as his head bent near to her own. What a pity he was a stranger; such a nice young man would make an excellent match for Lizzie Martin. Mother Goodword had spoken about how people's souls needed to be complementary in smell; this mellow, sweet scent was exactly what Lizzie needed to counter her honest, but slightly acidic fragrance. Perhaps...

'That were the cause of all the trouble!' Rue announced, straightening up and holding up the toothpick to show the tiny shard of acorn shell from under the horny part of the hoof.

'Thank you! I'm much obliged!'

'He needs treatment. He's got seedy toe. It don't hurt him, but he'll get things stuck up there. You need to get the bad bit cut out, and then new horn will grow back just fine.'

‘Thank you! I’d have thought you a Wisewoman, if you were not so young,’ marvelled the young man

Rue beamed and thought he was an *excellent* young man. ‘I’m going to be a Wisewoman one day.’ Then her face fell as she recalled her present difficulties. ‘Perhaps.’ Then she recalled her newest idea regarding *him* as an agreeable solution to her failing assignment.

‘Come with me,’ she ordered, taking hold of the donkey’s bridle to turn him about. ‘I’ll take you to the nearest farmhouse, it’s just down this lane. They’ve a neighbour who’s first rate with horses and mules and the like. He’ll soon sort his hoof out. And the mistress is a right hospitable lady who’ll not see a stranger go past her door without giving him a hearty breakfast.’

‘But I’ve already breakfasted,’ said the young man. But Rue was on a venture. She would catch two birds in one net, for sure. She would put the cow to rights, *and* she would introduce Lizzie to this handsome young man who smelled clean and wholesome.

‘Do you care for cows?’ she asked over her shoulder, as she marched down the lane, with the donkey trotting companionably beside her.

‘Cows?’

‘Be sure to say nothing unkind about cows at the farmhouse.’

‘I have nothing unkind to say about cows,’ he said, hurrying to keep pace. ‘I think them very useful creatures.’

‘Excellent.’ Rue halted unexpectedly, a sudden thought striking her. ‘Are you a bachelor?’

‘A bachelor?’

He repeated questions a lot, Rue thought impatiently. She stared at him intently, to show she was waiting for a reply.

‘Are you... an unwed maiden?’ he answered, not in a rude tone, but clearly, he wished to make a point of showing how personal her remarks were. He had a good sense of decency about him. Lizzie would never consider a brazen peacock or a pert jackanapes.

‘I am,’ she replied. ‘Are you?’

‘A maiden?’ his mouth was twitching into a smile, while his eyes still looked a little surprised. He had light blue eyes. She hoped Lizzie liked light blue eyes. Some maidens were all for dark, brooding ones these days, according to the current fashion in ballads. She caught his meaning and laughed heartily. He laughed with her. This was all very promising. He had

a sense of humour. Lizzie was very pragmatic on the whole, but she liked a good joke as well as anyone. She resumed walking.

They reached the farmhouse door. Good thing the feisty cockerel, who usually kept guard, was elsewhere. She didn't want the donkey spooked by it, and lose her prize. She had no need to knock, for the door flew open.

'I thought it was you,' cried May Martin. I saw you from the front parlour, and I said, I declare, it's Sister Rue with a donkey and a man! They did not believe me, but I was right!'

'Sister Rue,' said Mistress Martin, coming to the door. 'What brings you at such an early hour and on such a cold day?'

'Morning, Mistress Martin. I've a donkey in need of aid. And I'd like to see Lizzie, if she's there.' Rue peered into the hallway beyond the door, hoping for a glimpse of her friend.

'She's not back from milking,' said Mistress Martin, eyeing the young stranger beyond. May was peering out at him with even more interest.

The stranger saw their curiosity and made a bow. 'Excuse me, Mistress, I've no wish to trouble anyone. But if you've a neighbour skilled in farrier work, as this young lady has said is the case, then I would be obliged if I could employ his services.'

Rue felt proud of his polite manners and nice way of talking. He did not sound uppity, but neither did he sound uneducated. He was *perfect*.

'Well,' said Mistress Martin, still examining him, as though to take the measure of his worth. 'Master Larkins is good with cows and sheep, to be sure, but it's young Benjamin Larkins, his son you'll be wanting. He's the one gifted with horses. I'll call my son from the meadows and he'll take you to him.'

'No need,' said Rue brightly. 'I'll show Master...' she turned to the stranger, with a questioning look.

'Smith,' said the young man with another bow of his head. 'John Smith.'

Rue was a tad disappointed. John Smith was rather a dull name. So very common. It was hardly suited to a romantic hero.

'That way,' she said, pointing Master Smith in the direction of the milking shed.

'What did you come for?' Mistress Martin called after her.

'Just a bit of Godmothering business,' replied Rue.

'Does your Godmothering business include the young man yonder?'

Rue shrugged, but there was no escaping Mistress Martin's direct gaze. 'Not exactly. At least, I didn't intend for him to be. Perhaps. Perhaps not.' She shrugged again. 'Perhaps he only needs some farrier work and will be on his way again.'

'Well, be sure to bring him to the kitchen while his donkey is stabled. I'll not have a stranger pass by without tea and cake at the very least.'

Rue grinned. She had been hoping for such an offer. The longer she could keep Master John Smith at the farm, the more chance there was of him and Lizzie having a significant first meeting. Surely this would be an excellent morning's work after all. Things were looking up.

ELIZABETH MARTIN DID NOT SEEM UNDULY IMPRESSED with John Smith. She gave him a curious glance on his first appearing in the milking parlour, then she shooed him out, telling him that a stranger would upset her cows, who were very particular about who watched them being milked.

It took Rue some persuading to get Elizabeth to agree to show them the way to the stable forge.

'I haven't time, Rue,' she argued. 'It's a good mile, and I've a score of chores to get done this morning.'

'What's a mile?' said Rue. What was the matter with this girl? She would never get herself wed if she spurned every good-looking fellow that came into her milking parlour. It was not as if it were a regular occurrence.

'Why do you need me to show you the way?' Elizabeth asked suspiciously. 'You know well enough where Ben Larkins works.'

'I'm barely a nodding acquaintance,' said Rue, trying to look innocent. 'He won't care for me turning up recommending a stranger. They need a neighbourly introduction.'

Elizabeth frowned, and took forever to finish milking Clovis, a dun-coloured cow who regarded Rue as warily as her mistress did.

'Where's Gladioli?' Rue asked, looking for the little Welch cow.

'In the south meadow. Why?'

'How come she ain't here being milked?'

'Because her milk still comes out blue,' said Elizabeth grimly.

'Oh. But does it taste good?'

'It causes one to have the strangest dreams.'

Rue winced. 'Well, I know how to put her right. I'll come back for her when we're done.'

'Hmm,' was Elizabeth's wry reply. 'Master Smith,' Elizabeth called out as she hung her milking pail up, and tidied her stool away. 'If Sister Rue offers to be-spell your donkey, be sure to decline. Her magic has unexpected consequences.'

'Thank you for the warning,' said Master Smith politely. 'I did not realise she was magical.'

'Shall we go?' Rue said brightly. 'Lead on, Lizzie. I'll follow you and Master Smith.'

But Elizabeth strode away in front, and Master John Smith fell in behind. This was not quite as Rue had planned. When they paused a minute at the little brook to let the donkey drink, Rue took the opportunity of pinching Elizabeth's arm. 'Why are you being so unfriendly?' she whispered.

'Unfriendly? What are you talking about?'

'To Master Smith. You've not said one word to him.'

'And why, pray, should I have a word to say to him? He's but a stranger passing through, and you've put me in a bad humour by taking me away from my chores. It'll take me half the day to catch up again.'

'You right-rude crosspatch! You don't deserve a nice young man!'

'Me, rude? Crosspatch? Why are you abusing me, when here I am obliging you by tramping across cold, wet fields for naught? If you think to be trying out your matchmaking business on me, Rosamund Richards, you've another thing—'

'Hush! He's coming. And it's Sister Rue, and I'm not trying out nothin'.'

'I don't believe you,' Elizabeth retorted. 'I know you too well. I know exactly what you're up to, and it won't work.'

'Excuse me, ladies, but if you care to direct me, I'm sure I can find my own way from here,' said John Smith, looking between Elizabeth and Rue. 'I have no wish to be any inconvenience, and I'm sure you've better things to be doing with your time.'

He spoke with such an amiable expression and sincerity in his manner that Elizabeth seemed in that moment to empty of all her crossness, and remember her manners.

‘It’s no trouble,’ she said in a softer tone. ‘And I’ve instructions to bring you back to the kitchen while your mount is stabled. Mama will not hear of you leaving us without tea.’

Elizabeth gave Rue a little glare as she spoke the last word. Rue grinned at her friend’s back as they walked on in single file. That was a little more like it. But, Mad March Hares! – what a work this matchmaking business was!

BEN LARKINS SEEMED nervous of Rue on learning that she was a Godmother student, and said more than once that he did not care for any magic business to be going on about him. Rue assured him there would be no magic, only a regular donkey to be looked at, and then she let Elizabeth do all the talking while she paced up and down outside the stables to keep warm.

All should have been very simple. Benjamin Larkins should have led the mule away to tend to him, Elizabeth should have turned aside with Master Smith to talk to him all the way back to the farmhouse, and Rue should have said her farewells, once in view of the farm, and gone to the south meadow to sort out the blue cow. That was what was supposed to happen. And if it wasn’t for the large pine tree overshadowing the stable yard, there would have been no difficulty.

But there was a pine tree above her. Rue rubbed her arm with an ‘*Ouch!*’ as a pinecone dropped upon it. She thought little of it, except that she was unlucky to have been standing there at that moment, until a second cone fell, striking her on the shoulder. She looked up in surprise.

‘You!’ she cried. ‘So that’s where you went to!’

The runaway chestnut sprite glared down at her and aimed another cone.

She dodged it, and it struck Elizabeth instead. ‘Ow! What was that? A squirrel? No, a sprite – how comes it to have squirrel ears?’

That was the worst thing she could have said, for the sprite turned purple with anger, and a fierce rain of cones was let loose on the stable courtyard.

‘Don’t worry,’ Rue called out, pulling the wand from inside her cloak. ‘I’ll soon have him in a better mood. Stay still, won’t you!’ she called up to the sprite. ‘*Ouch!* I’ll put you right again, if you’ll just stop hitting me!’

Rue had spent the past two days of confinement perfecting a nice, compact spell to turn back the sprite and cow. She was quite pleased with her rhyme:

All unnatural forms unmake.

Only true form must you take.

She closed her eyes to concentrate, letting the words formulate in her mind, ready to speak, and activate the power in the wand.

It should have been easy. The words spoken with clarity and authority; the wand activated by the desire of the wand-bearer, attaching its power to the spoken words. All Rue had to do was speak and direct everything in the direction of the sprite.

But what Rue could not see at that moment, because of her eyes being shut, was the sudden rustle of bushes beyond, and the appearance of a blue head on a long neck, a head with glowing red eyes.

The sprite saw it from its high vantage and shrieked, letting go of a pinecone the size of a goose egg, which struck Rue on the head just as she had begun the first line:

'All unnatural forms...'

She gave a cry of pain, whirled away from the direction of the sprite, cried out, *'Blasted Bullfrogs!'* and power shot out of her wand.

There was an explosion of light. The glare passed, and Rue opened her eyes at the exact moment that Elizabeth screamed and Ben Larkins shouted and the donkey gave a deafening bray.

'Rue! What have you done?' shrieked Elizabeth, rushing to gather up something small and yellowish on the ground.

Rue looked about her, feeling bewildered. 'What happened?'

'Master Smith!' said Elizabeth, holding out her hands, which was cupping something between them.

Elizabeth opened her fingers enough to show what she held.

'It's a frog!' Rue still did not understand.

'It's Master Smith!' yelled Elizabeth. 'You turned Master Smith into a bullfrog!' There was a pile of clothing on the ground, including a pair of laced up boots – the very clothes Master Smith had been wearing!

Rue suddenly felt light-headed, as though the world were spinning round. 'No!' she heard herself saying over and again. 'No, no, NO!'

'YES!' shouted Elizabeth. 'Now, DO SOMETHING!'

‘Do something, do something,’ repeated Rue, nodding her head, feeling shocked and panicked and confused, both by the blow to her head and the shock to her senses at seeing Master Smith *turned into a frog*.

‘Be calm,’ she told herself. ‘Be calm. You must be calm. Recall your training.’ Oh, this was dreadful!

‘Hurry, Rue!’ urged Elizabeth, holding out her hands. ‘He’s squirming and wriggling, I don’t know how much longer I can hold him!’

Ben Larkins looked on in horror. He was staring wildly between the place where Master Smith had stood and Elizabeth’s outstretched hands, and was talking in gibberish about nuts and witches and dragons. Master Smith’s donkey now had no master to hold him, and he was growing skittish with all the shouting and pinecones raining down.

‘Hold that donkey!’ Rue commanded Ben, and it seemed to bring him a little out of his shock to have something to do. It made Rue feel a mite better to have thought of a sensible order. She could do this. She could make a spell that would bring Master Smith back. She had to. This was life and death. She could not leave Master Smith to the fate of a bullfrog. But, oh, how her head spun.

She closed her eyes and immediately felt dizzy and faint. She forced herself to say the spell, but the words felt treacly and muddled.

‘*All natural forms unmake,*’ garbled Rue, getting the words disordered. Her confusion was compounded by Ben and Elizabeth shrieking the word – ‘*Dragon!*’ at the same moment, and the donkey braying in terror.

Rue did not mean to point her wand at Ben, who stood gripping the donkey’s halter. ‘*True form untake...*’ she gasped just before the power shot out of the wand. The dizziness from the blow to her head overwhelmed her and she staggered to the ground, the wand flying from her hand.

Just as she fell, she thought she heard Elizabeth shouting, ‘*No, no! Leave it!*’ and as Rue’s eyes closed upon the world, the last thing she saw was the wand flying through the air like a stick, and a small blue dragon leaping after it with a shriek of glee.

RUE OPENED her eyes and heard a frog croaking the saddest croak she had ever heard.

‘Oh no. This isn’t real.’

‘You made it worse, Rue!’ sobbed Elizabeth. ‘Master Smith is still a frog, and Ben is a donkey and a dragon ate the wand!’

‘The... dragon... ate the wand? Ben... is... a... donkey?’ The world spun round again, and this time it lurched into blackness, as Rue fainted.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

How will Rue undo her dreadful blunders?
What will Harriet and Emma do about their failed matches?
Can Frank Charmall make it to Highbury?
There's a dragon missing and a wand eaten –
can things get any worse?
To be sure, they can!

Read on to find out what happens next in
[Midwinter Mischief](#)

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